

I don't own anything worth millions.

Harry Potter and the Runespoor Shield

By Ms Spider

The crunch of gravel told Harry Potter his Uncle Vernon had left for work. He stared at the ceiling knowing he was hungry but he had no appetite. Harry heard his cousin, Dudley, snoring in the next room. Sighing he rolled off his bed and went to the wardrobe.

A strange fresh sent wafted out when he opened the wardrobe. He had to smile at the first new clothes he had ever had at the Dursleys'. Aunt Petunia had taken him shopping once a week since he had returned home. Uncle Vernon had even encouraged him to eat more. The threat of a host of wizards descending on them if they did not treat Harry better had done wonders for his life here on Privet Drive. Harry grinned with the memory of the Dursleys' horror of the incident, as he got dressed.

Harry paused in front of the mirror. With clothes that fit from shirt to shoe, he didn't look half bad he thought. Harry didn't try to flatten the hair sticking up on his head. He knew it was a waste of time. Still skinny, he thought. Taller though. His eyes traveled the length of his body up to his face not looking into his eyes. His eyes went instead to the scar on his forehead. Still the same, he sighed. As much as it hurt sometimes it's a wonder it doesn't change in some way, he mused. Slowly his gaze drifted to his own eyes. Still vivid green, like his mother's as everybody told him. This didn't bring a smile to even his thoughts.

Everything seemed the same. After all he had been through, all he had seen, he swallowed a lump in his throat. All the pain he had felt, one would think something would change, that there would be some outward reflection of his experiences. He met his own eyes, reluctantly. Even through his glasses, he couldn't hide his grief or his guilt. It had become a daily ritual for Harry, every morning to face himself. To force himself to admit the mistakes he had made just a month ago.

Every morning, after the grief and guilt, a surge of anger followed. It wasn't entirely his fault. If he had been told. If Dumbledore had told him about, the prophecy, the real reason he needed to study occlumency. If he had just told him everything, he wouldn't have been tricked into believing Sirius was in trouble. Harry wondered if he would ever get over this anger toward Dumbledore. His trust in the headmaster of Hogwarts had been severely breached. And he desperately needed someone to trust.

"If you can't trust Dumbledore who can you trust?" Ron and Hermione's voices echoed in his head. Deep down Harry knew this was true but sitting around with no one to talk to face to face made it very hard to let go of his resentment. Letters from his friends helped. Harry glanced at the pile of post on his desk. But sometimes he just needed to talk to someone. And when he needed someone the most, he always seemed to be stuck here on Privet drive. And it didn't help knowing why he had to stay here.

Harry sighed and decided to go to the kitchen for some tea and toast. Quietly he made his way down the stairs. Dudley usually didn't rouse until noon. Even though Dudley was now terrified of Harry and what might happen if he did anything to his smaller cousin, Harry still preferred Dudley asleep. At the bottom of the steps Harry heard his aunt in the kitchen. He walked down the hall and into the kitchen. He cleared his throat. "Morning," he said quietly testing her mood.

Petunia stared at him for a moment. "Morning, what do you want for breakfast?" She asked finally.

"Just tea and toast, please." He slid onto a chair at the kitchen table. She continued to stare at him for a moment then turned away. Harry hated these moments. His mother's blood was the reason he had to be here. He reminded himself. She put a shield of love around him when she died to save his life. Now her sister was protecting him too, reluctantly and bitterly as Dumbledore had said. The air was so tense. It was even worse when his Uncle Vernon was there. His aunt placed a cup of tea in front of him along with a stack of toast. Harry reached for the marmalade. "Thanks." He muttered.

His aunt continued her cleaning of the kitchen without speaking. She pulled a chair over to the cupboard to put something away in the upper cabinet. Harry watched her stretch to put the item in the back then she closed the cupboard door. Suddenly her shoe slipped on the highly polished chair, she flailed her arms trying to regain her balance. A slight screech came from her as she fell. But Aunt Petunia never hit the floor. With reactions honed from playing Quidditch, Harry caught her easily and set her gently on the floor. He looked down at her scared face.

"Thank you," She gasped still gripping his arms.

It was then Harry really noticed, he was looking DOWN on his aunt. He must have grown quite a bit. "No problem." He kept his face passive. He knew any second his aunt would get her composure back. No reason to believe she would treat him any different. As if in answer to that though, she hastily let go of him and turned away to the sink.

Harry sat back down. Maybe he should be grateful for the thank you and let it go at that. He thought. But a surge of bitterness, of tiredness over her treatment of him compelled him to ask. "What was my mother like? When you knew her?"

Aunt Petunia's shoulders stiffen. "I don't want to talk about it." She answered stiffly.

"You must have liked her sometime, before Hogwarts. I mean she was your sister. You couldn't have hated her all your life." Harry continued as if she hadn't answered.

"I dddidn't hate her." She stammered and glanced around like someone would hear them. "I am not talking about this."

"There's nobody here but us. Dudley won't be up till noon. And I do want to talk about it." Harry said firmly. Then Harry added more gently, "Look, I have only this summer and next to be here. Can't you tell me anything?"

His aunt didn't say anything. She bustled around getting a cup a tea with her back to him. He waited. At last she quietly sat down beside him with her cup. Harry was surprised to see streaks of tears on her face.

"We were very close before she got that accursed letter." Aunt Petunia said so quietly Harry could barely hear her. "I'm only three years older than her." Her voice choked. "I don't know what I can tell you. We were just two little girls playing together until..." she trailed off not wanting to repeat herself.

"What was her favorite color?" Harry asked quickly. "What did she dream about doing?"

"Lily? She wanted to be a ballerina. She loved to dance." Aunt Petunia almost laughed. "Or I should say spin. It wasn't really dancing. She liked blue and green. She hated her red hair. It was a brighter red when she was younger. It got darker." She stopped as more tears rolled down her face.

"Did you know my father too?" Harry wanted to hear everything. He couldn't believe Aunt Petunia was talking to him.

A slight smile twitched at Aunt Petunia's lips. "The summer after Lily and James graduated, he was always hanging around our parents' house. Him and all his friends."

"You met Lupin and Sirius?" Harry jaw dropped when his aunt smiled even if briefly.

"Yes, and another boy, Peter, I think his name was. He didn't come around as often as the others." She saw Harry's face darken with the mention of the name and she looked at him questioningly.

"He betrayed my parents to Voldemort." Harry growled softly. "He told him where they were hiding."

"OH," Aunt Petunia sat back, a look of relief in her face. "I never could believe Sirius had betrayed them. They were too much like brothers, him and James."

"I don't understand why you started ignoring her. You said your parents didn't mind her being a witch." He knew this was a touchy subject but he wanted to know.

For a long time Aunt Petunia didn't answer. Her jaw was clenched. "You aren't the only person to lose their parents because of Voldemort." She finally managed to utter.

"What?" Harry's mouth dropped open. "Your.... And my mom's parents, were killed by Voldemort?" He felt a knot twist in his stomach. "How? When?"

Petunia had gone very pale. "It was the spring after Lily had graduated. She became engaged to James and his parents wanted to give them an engagement party." She let out a breath she had taken. "Our parents were invited to their house as was I and my fiancée, Vernon." She closed her eyes but they blinked furiously underneath the lids. "Vernon had worked over so we were late getting there." Each sentence seemed harder for her to speak.

"As we approached the neighborhood we saw a green glow." Her breath became quick and shallow. "When we came to the house...there was this great green skull in the sky over the house." She looked up when Harry gasped. "Yes, Vernon had no idea what it meant. I was hysterical. I knew. I ran into the house. Lily and James were already there." Her voice broke. "James on his knees by his parents' bodies and Lily weeping over ours." She covered her face with her hands. Now her voice was muffled. "They were just laid out there and staring..."

"I didn't know." Harry said softly. "Nobody told me. Why weren't my parents killed too?"

"They arrived after it happened. They were too late..." Aunt Petunia emerged from behind her hands. She reached for her teacup and took a sip. "Vernon was appalled. He said it was either him or them. He wasn't putting his life in danger. I agreed. I was so angry. If my father and mother hadn't gone to a wizard's home they would still be alive."

"People die all the time. They don't have to be associated with the magical world to manage it." Harry stated quietly. "So after that you didn't speak to my Mom?"

"Oh, we wrote back and forth for a bit." Aunt Petunia said tiredly. "Vernon didn't like the owls coming around. The last note I got from her told me she was going into hiding with her husband and little boy. She couldn't say where or for how long." Another tear rolled down her face.

"Thanks for telling me this. I know it was hard for you." Harry reached out and touched her hand. Her eyes fixed on the touch and she seemed to be holding her breath.

"Come with me." She abruptly rose. She opened the kitchen door that led to the back garden. Briskly she walked to the garden shed and opened the door. She moved a couple of tools and a box then pointed to the wooden floor of the shed. "Pry up those two boards."

Harry grabbed a shovel and lifted the thick planks. Underneath, a shallow hole contained two cardboard boxes and a small trunk. With a nod from his aunt Harry removed the containers from the hole. He started to open one.

"Not here." Aunt Petunia hissed. "Take them to your room. You might as well have them. I haven't looked at them for years." She stared at Harry as if he had caught her in some lie then turned and left.

Chapter 2

It took two trips to haul the boxes to his room. The trunk was very heavy. Harry opened one of the cardboard boxes to find it crammed with letters. He carefully pulled one out. There was no stamp on it. The handwriting looked young and unused to writing with a quill. He pulled out the letter.

Dear Mum, Dad, and Petunia,

Hello from Gryffindor tower! It's late and I'm tired but I just had to write so I'll make it quick. I'm a Gryffindor. It is a school house. There are three others, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Gryffindors Rule! Everyone is sorted into one of the four houses. It's kind of scary but once my house was announced all the others in that house cheered for me. Then there was this feast. The table was laid out with golden...real gold plates and all of a sudden the food appeared on the table. And everything was delicious. The Castle is huge and the staircases move!

Mary (a girl in my dorm) said I could use her owl to send a letter. I guess that's something you will have to get used to, owls coming and going. Maybe I should get a post owl. Lots of kids have pets.

I better send this off and put out the candle. I'll write more later.

Love ya all

Lily

Harry reread the letter many times. His mom's first owl post letter from Hogwarts, it was like being there with his mother, at Hogwarts for the first time. A lump came to his throat but Harry eagerly grabbed the next letter.

Dear Dad, Mum, and Petunia,

I had my first day of classes. The hard part is finding the rooms. Things move around in the castle. And the people in pictures move into each other frames so it's kind of confusing.

My favorite class is Charms, taught by a dear little wizard, Professor Flitwick. Also I liked Transfiguration but there was a couple of boys I have to admit are way ahead of everybody. The one is really cute. Sirius Black. It's too bad the pair are a couple of (as granddad would say) "Puffed up pop'n jay." I don't mind them being smarter than me but they don't have to show off all the time.

Other classes are Potions, Herbology, Astronomy, Defense Against the Dark Arts and History of Magic, which is taught by a ghost!

The box seemingly contained all the letters his mother had written while she was a student at Hogwarts. From the innocent writings of a muggle-born first year astounded by Hogwarts to the graceful script of a confident young witch.

Setting the letters aside Harry looked into the other box. He gasped. Photos! Picture after picture of his mother and Aunt Petunia as children. An older couple, they must be his grandparents. Harry thought. Yes, he remembered them from the Mirror of Erised.

A thick envelope made of parchment caught his eye. Harry pulled it out of the box and opened it. He gasped. The top picture showed his mother sitting on his father's lap, kissing and Aunt Petunia sitting on Sirius's. And they were kissing. The next one showed his mother on his father's lap again and Aunt Petunia on Remus Lupin's lap...again being heartily kissed. He stared part in disbelief and part in disgust. He shook his head and went to the next picture. Aunt Petunia was still on Lupin's lap but now his mom was sitting in Sirius's lap. And he was kissing her! He didn't know if he could take much more of this. He cautiously looked at the next picture and burst out laughing. The photo's subjects hadn't changed but Sirius was finding very hard to kiss anyone because his lips seemed to have been sewed shut. The

magical picture Sirius shook his fist at an unseen picture taker. Lupin, Petunia and his mom were laughing so hard they were crying.

Aunt Petunia had known Sirius and Lupin. Harry had to let that soak in. Lupin and Sirius had never mention knowing Aunt Petunia. But then, Harry thought, the number of times he had actually talked to either of them about his parents could be counted on one hand. He sighed. He wished he could talk to Lupin. Just to talk about... things. The joy of having so many of his mother's things seemed to have vanished. Harry turned to the small trunk, hoping to find something that would take his mind off things. But it was locked. He turned to find his wand but had to stop himself short. He couldn't use magic outside of school.

Hedwig hooted softly from her cage. Harry rose and went over to stroke his snowy owl. She nibbled his fingers and hooted again then stared meaningfully at him. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to ask," He mullied. He gave her a final pat and rummaged around for parchment, ink and a quill.

Dear Professor Lupin,

I recently had a talk with my aunt and she gave me some things that had belonged to my mum. I don't know if you could visit to discuss them. You could come at night and no one would be the wiser. There are some very disturbing pictures I think only you can explain.

Yours truly,

Harry

A sly smile spread across Harry's face. That should rouse his interest. In a short time he was watching Hedwig fly off a letter attached to her leg then turned back to the boxes. He went back to sit on his bed and spent the rest of the day reading through the letters his mother had wrote.

His Uncle bellowed for him to come down and eat dinner was the first time he had looked up from his reading and he was only half way through. His muscle protested as he unfolded his legs. Slowly he went down to dinner, feeling like he was walking from the magical world of his mother's to a murky muggle version.

For the first time this summer Harry felt really hungry. More important, he felt like eating. And he ate as much as his aunt could push in front of him. Even Dudley had stopped shoveling in food to watch Harry eat. If nothing else, Aunt Petunia was a good cook, Harry thought as he savored the last bite of steak.

After dinner Harry helped clear the table. He didn't mind really. He had done it often enough. At least this time he didn't have to wash them. "This is the last," He told his aunt as he set a stack of plates on the counter. She nodded but didn't answer. In a moment of weakness Harry started to ask if she wanted him to dry or something but the doorbell interrupted.

Uncle Vernon footsteps thumped down the hall and Harry could hear him grumbling about late callers. His uncle opened the front door and an even toned voice spoke but Harry couldn't hear what was being said. His uncle's voice was tense and curt. Both Harry and his aunt had frozen to listen to see who the caller might be. They didn't have long to wait.

"Boy! Get Out here! Now!" Barked Uncle Vernon. Harry hurried into the front hall. Standing in the doorway was Remus Lupin. He looked strange in muggle clothes that were in better shape than the wizard robes Harry had last seen him wear.

Chapter 3

"Professor Lupin!" Harry exclaimed.

"He's a professor?" Uncle Vernon looked the man up and down. "Figures."

"Actually I only taught one year. Once it was made known I was a werewolf, I was forced to resign." Lupin said casually to a horrified looking Uncle Vernon. "Call me Remus, Harry." He added as he shook Harry's hand and patted him on the shoulder. Lupin looked up as Harry's aunt walked up behind his uncle. "Petunia! It's good to see you again. How are you?"

Harry felt sure his side would split open from the laughter he was holding in. Uncle Vernon's face had turned this mottled color he had never seen before. His aunt looked like she might faint. But to Harry's surprise she recovered herself quickly.

"Fine Remus. Would you like a cup of tea?" Aunt Petunia didn't look at her husband or Harry.

"Yes, please. Thank you. Would it be a bother to have it in Harry's room? I would like a little chat with him."

"Not at all." She turned and bustled off to the kitchen.

"So, Harry, how are you?" Remus gazed up and down at him. "My word, you have grown. I must say you look sharp." He ran a finger across the shoulder of the new shirt Harry wore.

"He should. He's cost us a fortune this year." Uncle Vernon blurted out. "Not counting what he eats."

"How nice of you." Remus said unsympathetically. His eyes had hardened causing Uncle Vernon to stop his ranting.

"Here you are, Remus." Aunt Petunia held a tray of tea and cakes.

"Thanks you ever so much, Petunia. Here let me. No, no, I can manage." He took the tray from her. "Harry, if you would lead the way."

Taking two steps at once Harry bounded up the stairs. When he was able to shut the door behind Lupin. He finally blurted out. "I can't believe you came through the front door. My uncle's worst nightmare." He laughed.

"I wasn't going to sneak in like a thief in the night, Harry." Lupin put the tray on the desk. "Wow, letters from Lily." He gazed at the mess on the bed.

"Yea, they're great." Harry gathered the piles up to make room so he could sit on the bed. He watched Lupin pour tea and sit down on the chair by the desk.

"You said you had some photos that upset you, Harry," Remus seemed to have turned into a professor again from the sound of his voice. "May I see them?"

Harry wasn't going to let go of his little joke so soon. "In a moment." His face sobered as he said. "It's been hard this summer."

"Yea, I know." Remus looked down and sighed. "Even harder for you I imagine."

A flare of anger surged into Harry. "Can you? Can you really know how hard it is being here?" He tried hard not to shout at Lupin. "Every year I have come back here with a load of pain and no one to talk to. Absolutely no one!" His eyes blazed. "Letters really aren't the same as talking when you need to talk and don't say they are." To his horror his eyes filled with tears and his throat closed so he couldn't even swallow. He turned away to get control of himself.

"I'm really sorry Harry, I truly am." Remus's voice choked and looked at Harry with tears in his eyes. "I'm here now."

Harry sighed and slumped down on the bed. "I do appreciate you coming. I didn't really expect you to. The hard thing is, needing to talk is not a thing you can turn off and on, you know."

"I know. I sometimes feel like I need to be with people but when I am then I want to be alone." Remus paused before sipping his tea again. "What?"

"That's exactly how I feel." Harry looked at him incredulously. "You knew him a lot longer than I did." He said softly.

"The length of time you know someone has nothing to do about how you feel about them." Remus said quietly. "And Sirius was a link to your parents. For both of us." Tears started to roll down the man's cheeks. He quickly wiped them away and cleared his throat. "To tell you the truth," the man looked guilty. "I really didn't want to talk to you,' Then quickly he added. "No, no, Harry, I don't blame you for what happened. It's not that at all." He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "I just didn't want to get too close to the pain."

"I can understand that." Harry looked relieved and nodded. "Hermione tried to get me to talk before we left Hogwarts but I just didn't feel up to it yet." He looked down at the floor. "Sometimes I get so angry with Professor Dumbledore. If he had just told me about... things..." His teeth clenched.

"Ah," Remus sighed. "You aren't the only one. Sirius, Arthur and I, all, tried to convince Albus to tell you what was going on. I tell you this though, no one is more angry with Albus than Albus." Remus gazed at Harry until he looked up and met his eyes. "What you saw in Snape's pensive only makes your father human. And Dumbledore is human too and therefore makes mistakes. It's a hard wall to run into all in one year."

"Yeah. I guess they are human." Harry glanced at an envelope laid off to the side of his pillow. He picked it up and removed the photos from it. He gazed with a stony face down at the pictures. "Of all the things that has happened. I think these photos are the most disturbing." He held stack up with the backs toward Remus.

The man brow furrowed and he moved to sit beside Harry. Shielding the picture of Remus kissing his aunt with his hand Harry slowly gave it to Remus. "I know you are a werewolf but really Remus, how could you do this?"

"OH, my gawd." Remus gasped. "Harry, where did you get this?" Tears started coming to his eyes again but this time he was laughing.

"Or this? I almost gagged when I saw these." Harry handed him the one with Sirius kissing his aunt. Then the one with Sirius's lips sewn shut. The next moment the pair was laughing so hard they were leaning against each other gasping for breath.

"Oh, my ribs hurt." Remus gasped. "I had forgotten about the camera James had received as a graduation gift. These were taken the summer afterwards we graduated from Hogwarts." He managed to laugh. He put an arm around Harry's shoulder and patted his back "Thank you, Harry, I needed this. I need to remember the fun we had...not the tears. I should have come here sooner."

"Tell me about this day." Harry wiped his tears of laughter and sobered. "I can't believe my aunt would be a part of it."

"Well, it was a great summer's day. James had his new camera and we were all getting pretty silly." Remus snorted again as he looked at the one with Sirius kissing Harry's mom. "Sirius crossed the line a bit. James said he needed another picture of that because he had moved the camera. Then he hexed him just before the picture snapped." He continued to smile at the memory.

"Petunia was all right before her parents died. Although I never did like her fiancée." Remus jerked his head toward the first floor to mean Harry's Uncle. "I even told her once she could do better." He sighed. "She was sort of jealous of Lily. Lily was pretty, she wasn't. Lily was smart; Petunia struggled to make the same grades. Then the letter from Hogwarts made Lily special and wonderful in her parents eyes."

"It's strange my mom was magical and her own sister wasn't. You think it would kind of run in families." Harry had gotten up to pour himself some tea.

"I was told, for muggles, it had to do with the moment of their birth, the stars and planet alignment, that sort of thing." Remus stated. "But if you ask me, it's just a roll of the dice." He put the pictures back in the envelope. "Well, perhaps I should go and let you get some sleep." He saw Harry stifle a yawn.

"No don't go yet," Harry yawned again. "I almost forgot." He grabbed up the small trunk from beside his desk. "Could you open this for me?" He placed the heavy trunk on the bed.

Remus looked at it suspiciously. He examined at the keyhole then look intently at the decorative markings on the metal strapping. "This was Lily's?" He asked as he continued to inspect the trunk.

"I think so. It was with the other two boxes that my aunt had hidden." Harry wondered at the man's distrustful of the box. "Why do you think it could be someone else's?"

"Well, no, not really," Remus looked up and grinned ruefully. "You see, your mother was the best in our year in charms. So if this was hers, I have no doubt there's a nasty little jinx waiting if you try to open it without the right key or words."

"Oh," Harry felt a little shocked. "I hadn't even thought about that."

"I could take it with me and try to open it." Remus suggested. "Or we could work on it together when you get away from here next week." The man said casually.

"Next week?" Harry coughed the tea he had sipped out. "I'm getting out of here next week? That's excellent." He grinned then his face sobered. "Where to? The Burrow?" He really didn't want to go to number 12 Grimmauld Place.

"I know. It's not easy there." Remus patted Harry's shoulder. "Let's wait and work on the trunk together. Give us something to do beside mope."

"All right." Harry said doubtfully. "It will be headquarters, won't it?"

"It's the safest place for you besides Hogwarts." Remus sighed. "It's a lot brighter than it was. Molly's got Ron and Ginny cleaning even more furiously than last summer. And painting! I know I'll never get the smell of paint out of my nose."

"Hermione isn't there?" Harry asked as he went with Remus down the stairs.

"Not yet. I think she went on Holiday with her folks." Remus grinned and gave him a sly look. "You can't have her all to yourself, Harry. Her parents missed last Christmas with her so she could be with you."

"Hermione is just a friend, Remus." Harry looked at him firmly when they had reached the front door. "But between you and me, Ron fancies her."

"Really?" Remus's mouth dropped open. "I've never noticed. I'll have to pay closer attention to the pair of them." He patted Harry on the shoulder again and opened the door. "We'll see you next week. I can't wait to show those pictures to Dung." He laughed. "Goodnight Harry."

"Goodnight, Remus. Thanks for coming." Harry waved as he watched the wizard walk down the front garden path and slip behind a hedge. Then with a loud crack, he was gone.

Harry went back to his room and got ready for bed. He read a few more of his mother's letters until he felt he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer. At first he piled the letters he had read on his desk but then Harry worried what would happen if his uncle saw them and realized what the letters were and where they must have come from. So he hid them away in his school trunk. The Dursely's wouldn't dare to open it.

After he had got into bed and got comfortable, Harry noticed a dull ache in his stomach. He must have eaten too much. Harry thought rubbing his middle. He closed his eyes and ignored the discomfort. Ignoring pain seemed to a normal part of life for him, he mused. Slowly he drifted off to a strange dream.

The room was warm and dimly lit by the fireplace and a low burning candle. Something long and scaly was curled on the hearthrug. Harry turned his head to the left. There was solid stone block wall. Turning his head to the right he found the same type of wall. There were no windows in this room. A figure entered the room, from a dark corner followed by a second.

"Master," Both figures dropped to their knees before Harry.

"What news?" Harry's voice was high and harsh.

"Master, he's still at his aunt and uncles. He's protected by three ministry wizards that we can see."

"And no doubt that fool Dumbledore has others which you can not." Harry felt angry.

A different voice spoke. "I know they will move him next week, Master. Dumbledore told me just this morning."

"Excellent. I need you to find me the day and the time of the move, Severus," Harry anger raged and he gasped at the same time.

"So you have found your way back Harry Potter." The cold voice was now inside his head. His scar burned from the inside. "What do you want to know? Where I am? What I am planning?" The voice laughed cruelly. Harry's scar seared. "My guess is that you heard some of my plans. Yes, my next target is you. I can't hide it from the great Harry Potter. It would be foolish to even try." The voice mocked. Harry felt angry. Steeling himself, he wrenched his mind away from Voldemort.

A drop of sweat rolled down the side of Harry's temple as he clutched his forehead. He had forgotten to clear his mind before going to sleep. The bedclothes were soaked in sweat. He felt sick. The pain in his gut hurt even more now. Taking deep calming breaths Harry fought the urge to throw up. He just wanted to go back to sleep. He was so tired. Finally he managed to drift off into an uneasy doze, mingled with pain and the fear of hearing that voice in his head again.

"I think we should call a doctor, Vernon." A faint voice penetrated Harry's mind. He tried to close it out. He just wanted to sleep.

"Petunia, I'm not letting some respectable doctor get..." the voice lowered fearfully, "hexed if that boy goes into some fit." Harry blinked in pain at the light from a rising sun and wondered who needed a doctor. He just wanted to sleep and for the pain in his stomach to go away. Harry pulled the pillow around his ears trying to block out the low tones that sounded like shouting to him. A moan of pain escaped him. He grabbed his stomach and curled into a ball.

"We have to do something, Vernon. He's really ill."

"Oh, all right." He growled. "We'll live to regret our generosity. You mark my...Ruddy owl!" Uncle Vernon had leaped out of the way as Hedwig soared through the window. She landed on the top of her cage and clicked her beak at them. Then she tilted her head seemingly peering at the bed. She hooted loudly.

"Shut up you stupid bird." Uncle Vernon hissed. But Hedwig's hoot had penetrated Harry's delirium and he opened his eyes.

"I'll call the doctor." His aunt turned to leave.

"No," Harry called hoarsely. "No,"

"What should we do then?" Aunt Petunia asked.

"Send Hedwig." Harry struggled to speak. "Note to get help." His whole body shook with a fever making his teeth chatter as he spoke. Hedwig fluttered down next to Harry. She hooted soothingly then she held out her leg to the Dursleys and waited. Shaking, Petunia found

a blank piece of parchment on the desk and timidly dipped a quill in the open inkbottle. When she had finished writing, Petunia moved to tie it to Hedwig's leg. The snowy owl hooted loudly and snapped the note out of her hand and with a woosh of her wide wings she sprang out of the open window.

"Good, " Snorted Uncle Vernon. "That's out of our hands now. No telling how long it will take for that ruddy owl to get help. Unnatural way to send mail with a bird, don't know why they can't use the regular mail." His face fell. "I hope they don't send some freakish witch doctor. I won't have that in this house, Petunia." He started to rant. "I just won't arrrggh..." He leaped back as a loud crack sounded beside Harry's bed. A mixture of stale drink and tobacco filled the room.

"Eh? 'arry's sick?" An unkempt bundle of robes crouched to look at the figure curled up in the bed. "'arry?"

"Dung?" Harry looked blurrily back at him. "So quick?"

"Ya've got ja one smart owl. Stead of go'ng clear to London, she went to ole Figgy. And Figgy 'allers at me." Dung looked worriedly at Harry. "I best be off to tell Dumbledore. Sum'ne will be here in a thrice." With that and another crack, the wizard was gone.

"I won't have it, Petunia!" Uncle Vernon shouted. Harry wished he wouldn't. The noise seemed to make all the pain in his body even worse. "I won't have these freaks popping in and out of my house!" His mustache bristled.

"So sorry to inconvenience you." A calm polite voice made Uncle Vernon jump a foot. "It was most kind of you to inform us of Harry's illness." Albus Dumbledore stood serenely looking down on the Dursleys. His flowing deep blue robes shimmered in the morning light from the window. He quickly stooped to examine Harry. His face became grave. "How long has he been like this?"

"We did nothing to the boy!" Uncle Vernon spluttered fearfully. Even he could feel the power of the great wizard bending over the bed.

“Just this night. He was fine at dinner. He ate more than he had all summer. Remus Lupin came to talk to him then we found him like this.” Aunt Petunia’s voice trailed off with the intent look Dumbledore gave her.

“I will have to take him to St. Mungo’s.” The wizard glanced around the room. He picked up book on the desk and took out his wand. “Portus.” The book glowed blue for a moment then returned to normal. He turned to the bed. “Windgardium Leviosa.” Harry rose into the air. Dumbledore held his arms underneath the hovering boy to catch him. Then he put the book in Harry’s hand and to pair vanished.

Chapter 4

Sounds swirled around him. He tried to shut them out. The softest noise seemed to make every nerve in his body throb. A bright light filtered through his eyelids. Pain shot through his brain and he moaned. Harry wanted to scream but he knew it would hurt too much. The light went out and the haze around him grew quiet again. He sighed with relief. He just wanted to stay like this, not to feel or hear or see anything. Drifting with the fog in his mind, Harry slipped in and out of consciousness.

A voice sifted into his mind. He knew that voice. It sounded very worried, almost tearful. Struggling to open his eyes to see if he could help, Harry saw a blurry shape near his bed. Another blur stood at the foot. A different voice, one he didn't know, came from that blur.

"Mum?" Harry croaked. A gasp came from the blur by his bed.

"Harry? Oh Harry, Thank goodness." The figure had leaned over him with soft hands on both sides of his face. "Harry? Please wake up!"

Her face and voice drifted away. Harry felt exhausted from the effort. The cool hands on his face felt soothing though. He tried to open his eyes again. A face was nose to nose with his. A drop of something hit his cheek. With great effort he focused on the eyes and voice begging him to speak again. A familiar face came into sharper relief.

"Mrs. Weasley?" He whispered. Her face was wet with tears.

"Yes, Oh, Harry, Thank God. You'll be okay." She kissed his cheek. "You can rest now. The others will be so glad to hear you are awake." Mrs. Weasley pressed her cheek against his and kissed him again. Harry had dropped off to sleep before she gave him a second kiss.

Over the next three days Harry began to connect with the voices around his bed. Different shadowy blurs sat at the bed side chair at different times of the day. The chair never stood empty. Each blur seemed to have an urgent need to speak to him for some reason.

Forcing Harry to open his eyes and pull him away from the confusion in his mind.

On the fourth night, Harry opened his eyes. He felt completely awake. The room was dark. No light came from the narrow window high in the brick wall. Shifting in his bed, Harry felt his whole body protest at being asked to move. In the chair next to his bed, a red-haired, slightly balding man sat sleeping. His feet propped up on the bed and his cloak wrapped around him.

“Mr. Weasley?” Harry’s throat hurt but his voice sounded stronger.

The man started and dropped his feet to the floor with thud. “Harry, How do you feel?” Mr. Weasley looked intently into his face.

“Uh, weak. Where am I?” Harry gingerly looked around.

“St. Mungo’s. We’ve been so worried. But you are going to be just fine now.” Mr. Weasley patted him on his shoulder.

“I feel like I’ve fallen off my broom at fifty feet.” Harry sighed.

“It’s a wonder you feel that good.” Mr. Weasley sounded serious.

“I’m thirsty.” Harry whispered. He felt a straw pressed against his lips and he sucked a cool liquid into his parched mouth. It tasted fruity but not too sweet to irritate his dry mouth. He nodded that he had enough.

“How long have I been here?” Harry looked around at all the blurry flowers and boxes of candy on every free horizontal space in the room. He didn’t have his glasses on.

Mr. Weasley hesitated. “You’ve been very ill. Harry.”

“Please, Mr. Weasley, don’t hide things. Not like last year.” Harry sighed tiredly.

“You’re right, Harry.” Mr. Weasley nodded. “You’ve been here at St. Mungos for three weeks.”

"Three weeks?" Harry gasped. "What was wrong with me? What did I have?"

"It seems your mother's old letters harbored a nasty strain of scrofungulus. Most wizards get some form of scrofungulus as babies so when they come across the more lethal kind it does very little harm to them." Mr. Weasley said.

Harry sat bolt upright in alarm. "My Mom's letters? You didn't have to..." He couldn't say it.

"Calm down, Harry," Mr. Weasley put his hand on Harry's shoulder to get him to lie back down. "The letters are fine. They have been decontaminated." Harry eased back to the bed and sighed with relief. He yawned loudly.

"Time to rest some more, Harry." Mr. Weasley held up a goblet. "I promised Healer Davis I would make sure you drank this." He helped hold the goblet steady as Harry drank the potion. "Well done. That wasn't too bad was it?" The man smiled fondly at the boy drifting off to sleep. He reached out and brushed the fringe of black hair out of Harry's eyes and whispered. "Welcome back Harry."

Even though Harry had been told he was out of the woods, the bed side chair was never empty. At first he wondered about this but then he remembered he was Voldemort's next target. He was being guarded, again. As if confirming this, he had gotten a glimpse of Kingsley Shacklebolt standing outside the room when the healer opened the door once. To his own surprise, Harry found he liked the company. Tonks, Remus, all the adult Weasleys and even Mundungus were all fun to talk to. Although he missed Ron and Hermione, they couldn't visit until the healers gave the okay.

Slowly Harry felt his strength coming back to him. With time to reflect on many things Harry realized he had missed his own birthday, his sixteenth birthday. No big deal he thought. His birthdays never were. Some of his thinking found him dwelling on many of the memories Snape had brought to the surface of his mind with the occlumency lessons. Severus Snape the potion teacher at Hogwarts was Harry's

least favorite teach. Each held the other with much contempt, increasing in intensity with each passing year. At night when his watcher was sleeping, Harry found himself brooding more and more on his years with the Dursleys.

After a nap one afternoon, Harry woke to find Mr. Weasley at his bedside and sitting beside him was Hogwarts's headmaster Albus Dumbledore. "Good afternoon Harry." Dumbledore's cheery voice didn't match Harry's present feelings toward his headmaster.

"What are you doing here, Professor?" Harry reached for his glasses on the table next to his bed. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no. Harry." Dumbledore assured him. "In actuality I have been here quite often. Evidently this is the first you have been fully awake to notice."

Harry nodded and stared at the frayed edge of the blanket pulled across his waist. So many things he had planned to say to Dumbledore the next time he saw him but now he felt overwhelmed by the wizard's strength. He rubbed his forehead.

"Does your scar hurt?" Mr. Weasley asked softly.

"No, it's my head own this time." Harry sighed and leaned back looking at the ceiling. "I wondered what life would be like without pain." He looked at Mr. Weasley. "Even before I went to Hogwarts my life was filled with it. I don't think there was a single day I wasn't punched, kicked or pinched by Dudley. Or grabbed by the arm or hair and forced into the cupboard under the stairs by my aunt or uncle." He felt his anger rising. He continued to look only at Mr. Weasley. "Thanks to occlumency I remember a lot of those wonderful times." Harry snorted. "Like when I was five, I tripped over a toy of Dudley's on the front step. I cut my lip, skinned my hands and knees. The Dursleys screamed at me for breaking Dudley's toy and locked me in the cupboard." Mr. Weasley's face had gone white. "I was scared to death what they would say about the blood on my clothes. Sometimes I wonder how I learned to care about anything growing up with no inkling what comfort or caring felt like."

“Harry, I explained why...why I had to leave you there. For your own protection.” Dumbledore said softly.

“No, sir, it was more for the world’s protection don’t you think?” Harry voice was hard. “It had nothing to do with me.”

“I suppose that is true.” Dumbledore admitted.

“At least you are being honest with me. A refreshing change.” Mr. Weasley sat frozen in shock. Harry still hadn’t looked at the headmaster.

“Harry, I was hoping our friendship was strong enough to allow for mistakes.” Dumbledore said tentatively.

“Friend? What makes you think you’re my friend?” Harry snorted and finally gave Dumbledore a scathing look. “Ron and Hermione are my friends. Fred and George are my friends. They risked everything after my first year to come rescue me from starvation at the Dursleys. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are my friends. They’ve given me a place to stay, a place to belong.” He glared at Dumbledore stunned face.

“But I have yet to find anything the qualifies you as my friend.” The heat in Harry’s face only made his anger feel right. He didn’t care about the tears streaming down his face. He didn’t care about the tears spilling down Dumbledore’s cheeks into his beard. All his years of suffering alone were due to this man.

Dumbledore had dropped his head with Harry’s fury. Harry stared at him waiting. Waiting for that appalling calm manner to answer his anger. But an old man raised his gaze slightly and answered in a shaky voice. “I’m sorry, Harry. I’m sorry.” He rose slowly and left the room.

“Harry?” Mr. Weasley said softly. “He really did think...”

“He was doing the right thing.” Harry snorted. “Yeah, I know. That doesn’t change what I went through, with his knowledge.” He sank back down into his bed and closed his eyes, his jaw clenched. He

heard Mr. Weasley clear his throat and shift around in his seat then the man rose and left the room.

Chapter 5

If the absence of a bedside guard the next morning was any indication he was getting better, Harry hadn't been told so. If it was because of his anger at Dumbledore, Harry didn't care. Since he had been ill, he had felt changed. As if he had gone suddenly from a child to adult over night. Ideas and plans on how things would be different started building in his mind. Harry had just began to wonder when someone would show up to tell these schemes to when Remus walked into his room.

"Good Morning Harry." Remus said a little too brightly.

Harry saw the strained smile on the man's face. "Morning Remus. Have a seat." Remus eyed Harry then slowly sat down in the chair by the bed. His forced smile had vanished.

"We need to talk about what happen yesterday, Harry." Professor Lupin seemed to have returned from the tone of his voice.

"If you've come to say I was a bit hard on Dumbledore, save your breath," Harry said without emotion. "Tell me Remus, you knew my mom and dad pretty well. Would they have wanted me to have been treated like the Dursleys have treated me?"

"Of course not, Harry." Remus said. "But, you don't understand. Dumbledore had very little time to make that decision."

"Remus," Harry's voice was calm and even. "How much of the prophecy do you know about?"

The question took Remus by surprise. "Not all of it. Harry, I don't think we should discuss this here." He looked quickly at the door.

"Put an imperturbable charm on the door. No one will hear." Harry suggested. The man nodded seemingly a bit confused by Harry's manner. Remus pulled out his wand and charmed the door so they couldn't be over heard.

"The thing is Remus, I know all of the prophecy now. And while I think it wise not to shout it to the world, keeping it a secret has already gotten someone killed." Harry's manner was very business-like but gentle, almost an echo of Professor Lupin's manner. "I wasn't told not to tell anyone. And I haven't told Ron or Hermione, yet. But I realize now I can't keep it from them. Not when they are so close to me." Harry gave his head a little shake then looked into Remus's stunned face. "Do you want to know? I'm asking because I feel the need for your advice sometimes and unless you know the whole picture, any ideas from you would be flawed." Harry sat with his knees up and his elbow resting on them; his fingers laced together tapping on his chin.

The man gazed at Harry for a long moment. "Yes, I think it's best if I do know." Said Remus nodding. Softly in a short fifteen seconds, Harry repeated the prophecy to him. "Oh Harry," Remus sighed. "I was afraid it was something like that."

"It does kind of figure that way doesn't it?" Harry agreed. "But tell me. What use could Voldemort make of it? Other than coming after me, which had been his goal from the beginning."

"I think that is quite enough to be going on with." Remus said gravely.

"Think about it, will you? It's something I really need to know," said Harry.

"Okay." Remus looked puzzled, then he jumped up. "I almost forgot. You have other visitors today." He grinned and strode to the door. The door had barely opened an inch and two figures pushed through.

"It's about time," A tall red-haired teenage boy, pushed past Lupin followed closely by a girl with bushy brown hair. Hermione almost shoved Ron aside to grab Harry around the neck in a tight hug. Harry saw Remus grin as he closed the door as he left.

"Harry, oh Harry." Hermione breathed in his ear. Ron looked pale and unsure of himself as Harry's eyes met his.

"Give me air Hermione." Harry finally gasped. She didn't seem that strong just to look at. Tears streamed down Hermione's face when she pulled back. She sat down on the edge of the bed. Ron came to stand uneasily next to the bed. Harry looked up at Ron's unusually sober face. Harry reached out to shake his hand and Ron engulfed him in a clumsy hug, thumping him on the back.

"I almost lost you mate." Ron choked then pulled back trying to hide the tears in his eyes. "It's been a nightmare. Bill came to headquarters a couple days after you came here to St. Mungos and said it was only a matter of time before you..." His voice cracked.

"It was horrible." Hermione nodded tears beginning to stream down her face. "Every time the door opened we feared the worse."

Taking one of their hands in each of his Harry gave them a reassuring squeeze. "You should know by now how hard I am to get rid of." This didn't bring the smiles Harry was hoping for. "Look, while we're being all mushy and everything, I just want to say; no one has every had two better friends than you two. Putting up with my foul mood last year, not to mention almost getting yourselves killed." Tears were flowing down Harry's face now but he smiled through them. "Thanks for being my friends."

Hermione grabbed Harry and hugged him again. Ron grinned through his tears and sat down on the chair by the bed and patted Harry on the shoulder. Finally Hermione let go and they all sighed. "Here," Harry grabbed a tissue box and passed it around. "Okay, that's over with." Harry sighed again.

A laugh erupted from Ron, not from what Harry had said but because of Hermione's stunned face. Harry gave her a sly smile. "Oh you." She slapped at him.

"So what have you two been up to besides mourning my imminent passing?" Harry settled back against his pillows.

"That's not in the least bit funny, Harry." Hermione glared at him then stared concerned. "You still look like death." She clapped her hand

over her mouth. "I didn't mean to say that. You just look very pale and thin."

"You do look like death warmed over, mate," Ron agreed.

"What am I supposed to look like?" Harry laughed wondering how bad he really did look. There were no mirrors in his room. The discussion had taken a rather odd turn. They all laughed.

"Mom kept trying to keep us busy." Ron finally answered his question. "But really there isn't much left to do at headquarters anymore. We've cleaned and painted everything that doesn't move."

An awkward silence hung in the air. "Look," Harry broke the silence. "I know it isn't a holiday being my friends. And the truth to the matter," he sighed. "It's likely to get worse." He saw a glance pass between the pair.

"I can hardly believe anything can be worse than the last three weeks, Harry." Hermione bit her lip.

"Don't say that, Hermione." Cringed Ron. "It's like tempting fate."

"Fate, destiny, my lot in life." Harry sighed. "I have to tell you about the prophecy."

"But it got smashed. That's what you and Neville said." Ron said.

"It did." Harry avoided Ron and Hermione's eyes. "But the one to whom the prophecy was told has the means to recall it completely." He looked up and saw them exchange another glance. "Knowing the prophecy could put you greater danger than you are now. But then again, being my friends isn't the safest place in the world, for that matter."

"Who heard it? Dumbledore. It was Dumbledore wasn't it?" Ron guessed. Harry nodded. "I knew it. Who gave the prophecy? Firenze?"

"No," Harry laughed. "Our favorite Divination teacher, Sibyll Trelawney."

"No way." Ron gasped.

"Why would anyone take her seriously?" Hermione snorted her doubts.

"If you saw the prediction you wouldn't have a doubt." Harry said quietly. "As I told Remus, keeping the prophecy a secret has already caused one death so considering this, I think you two should know what is in the prophecy."

Nervously Ron and Hermione looked at each other. Then both looked at Harry and nodded gravely. "Let's have it mate." Ron said quietly. He swallowed hard as he listened. Hermione's eyes widen and tears stood in them.

"Oh Harry," Hermione touched his hand. "How? What?" She whispered not able to form a coherent question.

"I don't know how. Or what am I going to do, yet." Harry answered anyway. "Right now, there's no way I could beat Voldemort." He shook his head. "I just don't have the power."

"You do Harry." Hermione insisted wiping her eyes. "You're a more powerful wizard than you realize."

"You are mate. Even I can feel you are." Ron clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder, his eyes still disturbed by the telling of the prophecy. "You may need more training but you definitely have the power."

"Maybe," Harry sighed. "I dunno. But anyway, there it is. You're up to speed on stuff that should have been told five years ago."

Ron glanced at Hermione uneasily. "We saw Professor Dumbledore, at headquarters." Hermione started tentatively. "He was very upset."

"So," Harry seemed indifferent with the topic.

“Did you really blame him for...things?” Hermione looked reproachful. “We over heard Mrs. Weasley say he had been crying.”

“Let’s keep what happens between me and Dumbledore, between me and Dumbledore.” Harry’s voice was calm but firm. He saw another look pass between his two best friends then changed the subject. “Have you heard when I’m going to get out of here?”

“I heard in a day or two.” Ron said. “I think they are just waiting for you to get a bit more strength back.”

“Ah, I wondered.” Harry nodded. “Yea, I feel like a wrung out dish rag.”

“You look like one too.” Ron smiled then duck as Harry tried to whack him with a pillow.

Chapter 6

A sliver of light crawled up the wall as the sun set, replacing the patch of blue sky in the high window with stars. Half dozing, Harry mused over his best friends visit then sighed with sadness. Choosing to be his friends was their own decision, but the fact remained, they would be prime targets for revenge and for Voldemort to use as bait for him. Harry worried on how he could keep them safe. An image flashed in his mind, of all his friends dead and gone before he could defeat Voldemort. Pushing the thought out of his mind he rubbed his forehead. His scar ached.

The door opening brought Harry out of his gloomy thoughts. Mr. Weasley poked his head into his room. "Just dropping in to see how you are doing before I go to headquarters." Mr. Weasley smiled as he took the seat by the bed.

"I'm fine. I wish they would let me out of here." Harry shifted. "It's getting boring."

"That I know well," laughed Mr. Weasley. "I just spoke with Healer Davis and he said you could go home tomorrow. Well, home, to headquarters."

"I'm not wild about going back there." Harry frowned. "But it beats the Dursleys."

"No doubt." Mr. Weasley said. "Harry, about the Dursleys. Professor Dumbledore felt..."

"I'm wondering he really does feel." Harry interrupted with a grim face. "I know you have my best interest at heart Mr. Weasley but I really don't want to talk about Dumbledore. It's between the two of us."

The man surveyed the dark haired teenager in the bed and sighed. "Very well Harry. But, if you do need to talk, about anything, Molly and I are here for you," said Mr. Weasley.

Harry smiled at him. "Thanks. That means a lot to me, Mr. Weasley."

By the time the healers had given Harry the once over the next morning and okay his release, it was past noon. Afterwards Harry put on the muggle clothes, Mr. Weasley had brought. He was just lacing up his trainers when Tonks entered followed by Madeye Moody, Remus with Mr. Weasley behind them. "We've knocked like a million times," Tonks complained. She had pink hair today.

"Oh, you forgot to remove the charm on the door." Harry said to Remus.

"But I did remove it." Remus stared at the door. "Oh, I know, the Healers put a silencing charm on the door because you were very sensitive to sound and they didn't want you disturbed by people knocking."

"I suppose you four are my guard for the trip to headquarters." Harry eyed them resignedly.

"Yes, we thought it best to be prepared." Mr. Weasley said, "Ready?" Harry nodded. The group proceeded out of the ward.

The journey was uneventful until they turned onto Grimmauld place. They had just gone past the first two buildings when a growling from in between the two shabby houses seemed to echo around them. Then a kitten came streaking out followed by a large dirty white dog. A little black fluffy ball ran up Harry's pant leg. Before the dog could follow, Moody had transfigured it into a white rabbit. Harry reached down and detached the frighten kitten from his leg.

"It's okay." He soothed petting the fuzzy coat. Two big blue eyes still held a panicked look. The four little white paws clung to him like a burr. The kitten was barely the size of his hand. Grinning he looked up to find Moody scowling at the small creature.

"Best leave it here, Potter." Moody said gruffly. "We can't take it into headquarters with us."

"We can't leave just it here." Harry growled back.

“Harry, it could be a spy,” said Mr. Weasley glancing around as he spoke.

“We can’t take the chance, Harry,” Lupin sighed. “It’s something Voldemort would do.”

“I’m not leaving it to fend for itself.” Harry said stubbornly.

“I’m not keen about leaving the kitten either, Harry. But they are right it could be a spy.” Tonks looked sadly at the kitten.

“I can’t believe all you are afraid of a little kitten.” Harry held the kitten to his face. “Do you believe that? They’re afraid of you.” The kitten squirmed clutching Harry around the hand. The faces around him didn’t smile. “Look, I’ll stick him under my jacket and the little spy won’t see where headquarter is and everybody will be happy.” The expressions didn’t change. “If this is a spy, wouldn’t you rather know than set it free and never know for sure?” Harry said.

“You’ve got a good point there boy.” Moody grumbled. “It can come in, but keep it’s eyes covered.” Moody clunked off and Harry followed. The group stopped before number 11 to watch a woman approaching from the opposite direction. Mr. Weasley and Lupin stepped in front of Harry, while Tonks continued to guard his back.

“It’s only McGonagall,” Moody growled in relief but within earshot of the woman.

“And a good day to you too, Moody. ” The woman eyes narrowed.

The man ignored her. “Hurry up Potter, get inside.” Moody gave Harry a shove.

“It’s good to see you Professor. Just what we need a expert on animagi.” Harry fell in step with her as they walked up to the door of number 12. His teacher looked at him puzzled. The door opened and the group entered, Moody bolted the door behind them. The place was brighter and cleaner. A fresh scent of paint hung in the air. The hallway no longer had a brooding feeling about it.

“OH Harry, it’s so good to have you out of St. Mungos.” Mrs. Weasley started to hug him.

“Careful,” Harry warned and started to pull the kitten out of his jacket.

“Not here. Wait until we’re down in the kitchen.” Moody stopped him. So Moody, Harry, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Lupin, Tonks and Professor McGonagall trooped down to the basement. In the kitchen sat Hermione Ron and Ginny. They cried Harry’s name when he entered. Hermione and Ginny gave him a kiss on the cheek as he sat down between them. Mrs. Weasley started serving tea.

“What’s this you want to know about animagi, Potter?” Professor McGonagall asked stirring her tea.

Reaching inside his coat, Harry pulled the tiny kitten out and sat it on the table. “Some people,” Harry gave his guard a scathing glance. “Think this is a spy.”

“OH, he’s so cute,” Ginny and Hermione, said together.

McGonagall snorted. “I’m surprised at you Remus. You knew three animagus. You should know better.”

“I wasn’t one. And I wasn’t around when the three were studying the process. “ Remus defended.

“Still any Hogwarts graduate should know when one transforms, the creature is the same age, in animal years, as their human counterpart.” McGonagall lectured.

“They could have drank a shrinking potion after they had transfigured into a cat.” Moody insisted.

“Nonsense,” McGonagall snorted again and looked at the kitten now playing with Ginny’s fingers. “You know, Moody, sometimes a kitten is just a kitten.”

“There is one way to find out.” Moody drew out his wand. Ginny snatched up the kitten close to her and glared at him. “It won’t hurt it

if it's just a cat." He assured her. Ginny saw Harry and Ron nod and set the kitten down. It scampered across the table. Moody pointed his wand and blue light shone around the kitten making the black fur stand on end. Nothing happened.

"Seem to be a cat." Tonks stifled a laugh as Moody put away his wand.

"Satisfied?" Harry looked at Remus, who was trying not to smile, and Mr. Weasley who had started to cough to hide his grin.

"Yes, quite." Remus finally nodded

"What are you going to name him?" Ginny had coaxed the kitten back to her, looking longingly at it.

"How about you naming him? For that matter do you want him?" Harry smiled, as Ginny's eyes grew wide. "I've got Hedwig and I don't think she'll be to thrilled if I bring in a kitten. You know how she can be."

"Really? Mine? For keeps? Oh! Thank you, Harry, thank you!" Ginny threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. Then she remembered. "Can I keep it, Mum? Dad?" She looked at her parents.

"I think we would be the meanest parents alive if we said no to that." Mr. Weasley laughed. "Of course you can."

"So what are you going to call it?" Ron asked as the kitten stuck a white paw in his tea then shook it in his face. It scampered back to Ginny and she picked the kitten up.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" Ginny looked into the kitten's face.

"I dunno." Harry shrugged. "But I do know that's not the end you look at to find out." Everyone burst out laughing as Ginny flushed. Suddenly there was a tabby cat, with bespectacled markings around its eyes, on the table sniffing at the kitten. The kitten hissed and arched it's back. The next moment their professor was back in her seat.

"It is female." Announced McGonagall.

"Thanks, Professor." Ginny said choking back giggles. "I'll have to think of a good name. This may take some time."

Everybody watched the kitten caper on the table. Harry was glad for the diversion from his release from St. Mungos. It took the spotlight off him for once. Then too the kitten had helped distract his attention to the fact that this had been his godfather's house. Harry laughed to himself that one very small cat could have eased his arrival back to this place. Something he had been dreaded.

"I like her long white whiskers and white paws and her little white bib. She looks like she's wearing a little tuxedo." Hermione said. "And her blue eyes are really different."

"Most kittens this age have blue eyes like hers." McGonagall said. "They will change colors when she gets older."

"Oh, I wonder how Crookshanks will like her." Hermione looked around for her ginger cat.

"I think he's sleeping in the drawing room." Ron pouring some milk in a saucer and setting it out in the middle of the table. The kitten skidded over to it and lapped so fast droplets of milk clung to her long whiskers.

"She's just so cute." Ginny grabbed Harry's arm again and hugged him, tears shining in her eyes. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Harry grinned at her. Wondering a little, why she was getting so emotional over just a cat. Then he remembered getting Hedwig. He had been lost for words at Hagrid's gift. Although Ginny was more accustomed to presents than Harry had been, the Weasleys children often had to do without things they really wanted. With six older brothers and no sisters, Ginny was pretty much on her own in the Weasley family.

“Potter, are you paying attention?” Professor McGonagall voice penetrated his thoughts. “Harry?”

He looked at her focusing, “I’m sorry. What did you say Professor?” Harry didn’t mind the frown she gave him because he saw her lips twitch at the corners.

“I was coming here anyway so I brought along your OWL results. Since you were in St. Mungos the results were forwarded to me.” Professor McGonagall reached into the patented leather purse she carried, pulled an envelope out and handed it to Harry.

“Thanks,” said Harry nervously. Taking a deep breath and realizing every single eye in the room was fixed on him, he opened the envelope and removed the letter. Unfolding it, Harry scanned down the form, a smile slowly growing on his face. He nodded to himself with satisfaction at the outstanding in Defense against the Dark arts. Without looking up, he casually folded the letter and put it back into the envelope. He looked up innocently at the expectant faces.

“WELL?” Hermione prodded him trying to snatch the letter out of his hand.

“Oh, did you want to see my results?” Harry feigned surprise. With his hand held back out of Hermione’s reach, Harry hadn’t count on being ganged up on. Ron grabbed it out of his hand and promptly opened it and started to read it out loud. “Hey,” Harry laughed.

“E in Transfiguration, E in Charms, O in Defense Against the Dark Arts,” Ron snorted with approval. “O in Potions! Great! Now we can suffer together in NEWTS Potions. E in Herbology, O in Care of Magical Creatures. A in Astronomy, A in History of Magic, and A in Divination. Nine OWLs! Good job.” Ron thumped Harry on the back. “You beat me by one. I missed out in Divination.” Harry grabbed the letter back. “Hermione got ten of course. All O except an E in Ancient Ruins.” Harry saw the disgruntled look on Hermione’s face.

“You are to write a letter as to which NEWTS you wish to study. You’ll need to get it to me by the end of the week, Potter.” Professor McGonagall told him.

“Oh, I’ll do that Professor, thanks.” Harry sighed and blinked. He was getting tired. “I think, I’ll go up and lie down a bit.” He stood up and swayed.

“Come on, I’ll show you where you’re staying.” Ron took his arm, frowning at his mom who had started to fret over Harry as they left the kitchen.

“What? Aren’t we sharing a room?” Harry appreciated Ron’s help without him making a big deal about it.

“If you want to we can. But it’s a big house. There are lots of rooms and all of them clean as a whistle now.” They climbed the stairs. Harry was glad he had Ron to lean on. He didn’t say anything more but just let Ron lead him into a room and to a bed. “You look whipped.” Ron gently shoved him back onto the bed and took Harry’s shoes off. “Get some rest mate.”

“Yes, Mum.” Harry grinned as Ron pulled the covers over him. “Thank, Ron.” He sighed softly as he fell asleep.

Author notes: I hoped I counted all the subjects right for the OWLs. I think I counted them a hundred times and got fifty different results.

Chapter 7

A soft glow shone from his body. He needed no light to show him the way in the night. He was flying! Soaring with the wind. His wings, his own wings caught the thermal and sent him even higher in to the sky. Harry looked down, the earth miles beneath him. A flash of fire engulfed him. He burst above a different place gliding silently over a dark mansion nestled in a shabby dark forest. Someone called his name.

Harry opened his eyes. A little black nose with white whiskers sniffed his face. "That tickles, Spy cat." He rubbed the kitten's chin. A tiny putting purr issued from the kitten.

"Her name is Cleopatra. Cleo for short." Ginny corrected. "Mom says dinner is ready. But if you want to stay in bed, she'll bring something up for you."

"No, I'll come down." Harry sat up. He found his glasses on the bedside table and put them on. "Cleo, good name." He grinned as he followed her out of the room.

"I thought so. I think she's going to be beautiful." Ginny stroked the kitten. "Cleo loves Crookshanks but Crookshanks hates her. I think it's because Hermione is making over her so much. He's jealous." She giggled then broke off abruptly as walked pass the curtains covering Sirius's mother.

"Still haven't been able to remove her?" Harry asked darkly.

"No. And Mom, Dad and Remus have tried everything they can think of. Even Professor Dumbledore has tried a couple times to remove it." Ginny said the headmaster's name without the hesitation others were using around Harry.

It was Ginny's way, thought Harry as he fought back a smile. The youngest Weasley had surprised a lot of people last year. "Maybe they should let Fred and George have a go at it. I can't see anything surviving the two of them."

Ginny paused at the kitchen door the kitten swaying on her shoulder. "You know, I suggested that very thing but got laughed at for it. People underestimate those two. Especially now they have the joke shop. Think they are all fun and games and can't know anything useful."

Harry pushed the door opened and a deafening "Happy Birthday!" issued from the people inside. All the Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks, Madeye Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt and even Mundungus stood around the decorated kitchen table. Ginny gave Harry a push further inside as the all sang Happy Birthday to him. It took all the control Harry had not to tear up. This was the first time he had heard that song sang to him.

George Weasley pushed his way to Harry and snapped an elastic band under his chin to hold a cone shape hat on his head. "Now you are ready to party." He said with an evil grin on his face.

"But it isn't my birthday," Harry knew better than to mess with something one of the twins had forced onto him.

"Well, yeah, we did have a party when it really was your birthday but you were a real wet blanket, mate." Fred said.

"You didn't laugh at any of our jokes. Quite depressing." George nodded.

"Come to think of it, Harry isn't really much different when he's conscious." Fred mulled.

"Oh shut it," Harry laughed. If for no other reason, Harry liked Fred and George for treating him like he was no one special. Their mother looked angry at their jokes but Harry felt it made him even more part of the Weasley family, being teased by Fred and George. On the middle of the table sat a huge birthday cake with a large 16 in the center. All around the number was tiny golden snitches made of icing. Before Harry could thank all of them for going to so much trouble, a furry black ball landed in the middle of the cake.

“Ginny!” Mrs. Weasley groaned. The kitten scrambled to get out of the cake. Ginny quickly picked up the iced cat.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know she was going to do jump.” She looked at the kitten sticky with frosting. Ginny started to giggle. “Could someone...? Holding the kitten up.

“I’ll do it.” Several voices answered. “Scourgify!” The kitten was clean in an instance. But two of the cleaning charms seemed to have missed the kitten and hit Ginny in the face. She sputtered and spit out soap.

“Oops, Ginny it really was an accident.” George flinched at the look his sister gave him.

“Yea Ginny, I’d never do something so ordinary.” Fred looked insulted.

“Well, I guess we can eat around the kitten imprint.” Mrs. Weasley looked annoyed at the damaged cake. Everybody filled their plates with food and grabbed a butterbeer.

“So, George, what happens when I take off this hat?” Harry said casually, picking at the food on his plate.

“Harry, you don’t want to know, “ answered George, pausing before taking a swig from his bottle of butterbeer.

“Yes, Harry, much better if you don’t have a clue,” agreed Fred nodding.

“You have tested this?” Harry pointed to the hat.

“Of course we have.” Fred said innocently then started shoving food into his mouth.

“Uh, Successfully?” Harry saw George eyes dart to his mother.

“Success is such a relatively term.” George said airily. “Success can be measured in so many different ways.”

Harry sighed but he couldn't keep the twitch of a smile from his lips. "Am I going to have any hair left?"

"Well, that could be the question." George looked up in the as if thinking. "But many more possibilities comes to my mind. Your thinking is much to linear, my dear Harry."

Harry didn't like the sound of this. Loosing his hair sounded innocent enough. He knew it would grow back over night. Or at least it did once, when his aunt had cut it. He eyed the pair giving him; I dare you to take it off, looks. "Maybe I'll wait until later." Harry said and started to eat.

"Chicken." The twins chorused.

A burst of laughter came from the corner of the kitchen. Ginny, Hermione and Ron were looking down at something on the floor. Harry moved over to see. He laughed too. Sitting in a corner, Crookshanks was trying desperately to escape the clutches of Cleo. She gripped him around his thick neck and was vigorously washing his squashed-in face.

"Just like a woman," snorted Charlie, "Always wanting to wash something." The guys laughed and the girls rolled their eyes. Ginny picked up her kitten, grinning with happiness.

"Presents!" Ron called to Harry. "Time to unwrap your gifts mate."

Blushing Harry went over to the table, which suddenly had a pile of brightly wrapped gifts on it. He took the top box. It was narrow and long. Harry read the card that was with it, Mr. and Mrs. Weasleys' gift. He looked up and smiled at them. He tore off the paper and lifted the lid. A long flat metal arrow lay in the box. At one end was a hole. Harry looked up puzzled.

"It's for our clock at home, Harry." Mr. Weasley told him. "If you have no objections?"

Harry couldn't speak. He blinked furiously and shook his head. Swallowing hard Harry wiped his face quickly. After a minute, Harry gazed at all the Weasleys and said. "I would consider it a great honor to be included in the Weasley family." He reached over to shake Mr. Weasley's hand then to Mrs. Weasley's delight Harry bent and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you."

"Mine next." Ron shoved a box in Harry's hands. Their eyes met. Harry silently thanked Ron for the diversion.

"WOW. Thanks Ron, I needed new Quidditch gloves." Harry tried them on. "Excellent."

He continued to unwrap gifts from the group. From Fred and George, he received a large box of all their Weasley's Wizard Wheezes products. Hermione gave him a large box of chocolate frogs. Hagrid had sent a polished perch for Hedwig. Harry could tell the gamekeeper had made it himself out of branches and twine. Charlie and Bill Weasley, Moody, Tonks, Kinsley Shacklebolt and Mundungus pushed a box in front of Harry.

"We all went in together to get you this." Bill indicated the group.

"Thanks," Harry grinned. He unwrapped the box and opened it. An earthy scent of leather filled the kitchen. "Oh, WOW," Harry pulled out a pair of fine leather riding boots. The brown leather was supple and soft. "These are great."

"Those aren't just any old boots, Potter." Moody poked at one of the boots.

"No, Harry, they are magical. They'll always fit you just right. Be cool or warm just as you need." Tonks grinned.

"You'll never get your toes wet in them." Mundungus added.

"And, " Charlie emphasized. "Your footsteps can't be heard while you wear them."

"Wow," Harry repeated. No wonder the six had gone together to buy the gift. These must have cost a fortune. "Thank you. Thank you all." He sat down and pulled off his trainers and put on the boots. As Tonks had said they fit perfectly. He felt light walking across the stone floor making no sound. "Thanks, these are fantastic." With his invisibility cloak, no one would be able to find him at all.

"Last but not least, Harry." Remus handed him the remaining gift. Grinning Harry ripped off the wrapping.

"A magical camera!" Harry laughed, looking up at his father's old friend. A look of understanding passed between them. "Thanks Remus. This is great."

"We can get a picture of Harry taking off his party hat." George grabbed up the camera, pushing Harry toward the others. "Crowd around Harry, I'll get a group picture." He ordered. Everybody looked suspiciously at the twins.

"Look, I'll get in the picture too." Fred volunteered to stand beside Harry, who gazed at the twin skeptically. Fred gave him a wink, unseen by the others gathering around reluctantly. It didn't make Harry feel better. But Harry stood smiling for the camera knowing; most likely whatever happened wouldn't hurt anybody, permanently. "Take the hat off on three. One...two... three."

A loud bang and cloud of smoke encircled the heads of the group. Everybody waved the smoke away. Harry turned with a gasp. Everyone, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, Ron, Bill, Fred, Charlie, Tonks, Moody, Mundungus, and Remus, now had a head of black hair with it sticking up in the back, just like his. Harry roared and collapsed onto the floor laughing.

Chapter 8

“Dear, Mum, Dad, and Petunia,

I know it's scary, what's in the Daily Prophet about Voldemort. Rarely a day goes by here that someone doesn't receive post about a relative who has been murdered by Voldemort or his followers. But please believe me I am safe here at Hogwarts, probably safer than after I graduate next month, so please don't worry.

I'm studying hard for NEWTS and haven't much free time. I have been spending some of my free time with James Potter. I know, I said before he was a git but he has changed. He seems a lot more thoughtful and doesn't shoot off his mouth anymore at all. And he does comb his hair despite what the pictures I sent you look like. It just sticks up like that no matter what he does.

I love you all. Remember, even if the news is bad, I'm safe here.

Love,

Lily”

A light tap at the door caused Harry to look up from his mother's letters. “Come in.” He said softly.

“Harry dear, it's late.” Mrs. Weasley stuck her head in. Most of her ‘Harry Hair’ was gone but a few strands of black still poked out here and there. “Please put out the light and get some sleep.”

“I know it's late. But I'm not sleepy at all.” Harry smiled. “I was just reading some of my mum's letters.” He held up the one he had just finished. “I won't stay up too late, I promise.” Harry's tone was polite but also firmly said he would go to bed when he decided. Mrs. Weasley looked a bit confused. “Mrs. Weasley? Thanks for the party.”

“Your quite welcome, dear. Well, goodnight Harry.” Mrs. Weasley left and closed the door.

For a minute, Harry pondered the letter in his hand. At this point in time, he thought, Voldemort didn't know I would be born, that there would be anyone that could defeat him for good. Harry snorted. And that's me. Then he sighed. He had two more years in school to learn what he needed to know to vanquish Voldemort. The time span seemed both too short and too long to think about. I'm thinking too linear, Harry considered. That's what George had said. What did that mean exactly? Harry wished he had the Weasley twins' imagination. "Anything is possible if one has enough nerve" Ginny had said. Did he have enough nerve to carry out his plan? He hoped so.

At first the prophecy had echoed in Harry's mind, numbing his thoughts and not letting him settle on other issues. But now after his illness his mind seemed remarkably clear and able to focus more tightly on concepts and plans he had begun in St. Mungos. Now Harry was glad he had a room to himself. He could think without appearing to be brooding like last year. Harry read through a few more of his mother's letters before blowing out the lamps and going to sleep.

This time, Harry knew at once he was with Voldemort. For the first time the dark wizard wasn't in a room but creeping through a dark forest. Crunching sounds on either side of him told him his Death Eaters were near by. Harry strained to see in the dark. Where was he? Voldemort hadn't seemed to notice his presence yet. His scar seared but Harry ignored the pain. He had a bad feeling about this gathering.

"Lucius?" Harry heard himself speak. "Take out any that defy us. Bring back those who beg for mercy." He laughed softly. "I need the weak minded and they need me."

"Yes, Master." A voice on his right answered. Harry couldn't see even a glint from eyes in the dark. Where were they? Who were they going to attack? Harry felt himself press further into Voldemort's mind. He heard himself gasp. "You are a nosy pest, Potter." Harry heard the hated voice in his head. He struggled to control his own fear and pain. "Off to tell your friend Dumbledore? You'll be too late, I'm afraid. People are going to die tonight."

“Dumbledore isn’t my friend.” Harry managed to fire back. He knew Voldemort felt his resentment of Hogwarts’s headmaster.

“Dumbledore not your friend. My, my, what caused this falling out?” Voldemort had stopped to enjoy this bit of information.

“He left me with those muggles all those years.” Harry snarled. He found if he focused on his anger with Dumbledore the pain grew less. “He knew how they treated me.”

“Ah, like I said before. Strange likeness between you and I, Harry Potter.” Voldemort’s voice sounded almost gentle and thoughtful. “Raised by muggles.”

“Where are we?” Harry pressed. A flash of a village entered Harry’s mind. He knew he had seen it without Voldemort wanting him to and without his knowledge. It wasn’t Hogsmead. Where? He knew this place. Harry frantically searched his memory. Harry suddenly knew, Ottery St. Catchpole, near the Burrow. Harry wrenched his mind away from Voldemort and fell out of bed with a thud.

His door burst open and several hands helped him sit up. “Harry, Harry?” He heard Remus and Mrs. Weasley’s voice calling him. He kept his eyes close. He knew if he opened them he would be sick.

“They are attacking.” Harry gasped. “Ottery St. Catchpole. Voldemort himself, Death Eaters, lots of them.” He managed to blurt out.

“Are you sure, “ Remus said. “You saw it?”

“Yes, I saw into his mind. He didn’t really want me to see but I managed.” Harry drew breath. “They plan to take hostages. And kill.” He grasped Remus’s hand tightly. “Can they be stopped?” Harry felt he could willingly endure twice the pain he felt with these contacts if he could stop just one death.

“We’ll try.” Remus squeezed Harry’s hand and ran out of the room. Mrs. Weasley had gone out to make some tea for him. Sweat

dripped from Harry's forehead. Ron and Mr. Weasley helped Harry back onto his bed.

Mrs. Weasley hurried in back in and put a teacup into Harry's hands. "Drink all of this, Harry. It will calm you." Harry drank the potion down. "Remus has informed Dumbledore. I'm sure they'll send out the Aurors." This information was good but it did nothing to relieve the dread in the room.

The potion started working and Harry felt his heart quit pounding. He managed to take several deep breaths and chanced to open his eyes. A lamp had been lit and he blinked, squinting at the Weasleys. George and Fred came in looking tousled haired. "Really Harry, didn't you get enough attention at your party?" Fred yawned; his hair still had many black streaks mingled in the red.

"Boys, that's enough." Mr. Weasley stopped the jesting and told them what Harry had just seen.

Harry saw their faces sober, all humor had left their eyes. It reminded him of the night Mr. Weasley had been attacked by Voldemort's snake. "It's begun." Harry said softly. "The second war has begun."

Chapter 9

A bird singing outside the window woke Harry. Bright sunlight filled the room. Oddly Harry felt rested. He listened for movement of the others but heard nothing. He slid from his bed and got dress. Even in the hall he heard no sound of talking or any noise at all for that matter. Shrugging he walked down the stairs to the kitchen. Finally some signs of life in the house issued from the basement. Pushing the door open Harry went inside.

"OH Harry, How are you?" Mrs. Weasley asked anxiously. "What do you want for breakfast."

"Just toast and tea, please. I'm fine Mrs. Weasley." Harry glanced around at the crowd of people in the kitchen, some nursing small wounds and all looking very tired. George and Bill Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Tonks, and many that Harry did not know by name. There was one other he did know though, across the table wearing burnished gold robes sat Albus Dumbledore. "Did you stop him?" Harry looked at Remus sitting at the table his arm bandaged. But Harry didn't look at the old man across the table. He knew Dumbledore was looking right at him, hoping to catch his eyes.

"Yes, and no." Remus said tiredly. "Four muggles died and one wizard. Miles Zellers, he was an Auror. But I don't think Voldemort got to do what he had planned to do."

Harry sat down next to Remus. "Are you all right?" Glancing at the man's arm.

"Oh, I'm fine, Harry." Remus smiled at Harry's concern. "Harry, could you tell us everything you heard last night?"

"That can wait until after he eats for heaven sakes, Remus." Mrs. Weasley set a teacup and plate of toast in front of Harry.

"That's okay. Mrs. Weasley I can talk and eat toast at the same time." He took a sip of tea. "I don't know what more I can tell you, though." Harry stared at this toast concentrating. "Malfoy was there. I heard Voldemort call him by name."

"Yes, the death eaters caught last June have all been released from Azkaban." Dumbledore told him. But Harry didn't look up from his toast. "Harry would you please look at me?" Dumbledore asked politely.

Focusing on his resentment of the old man, Harry raised his head and gazed disdainfully at Dumbledore. He had to control his shock. Gone was any trace of twinkle in those blue eyes. Gone was the kind and tolerant face, alarmingly replaced by a harsher, older and more careworn Dumbledore than Harry remembered back in June. He felt a little ashamed but maintained his scathing look at the man.

"Harry, when are you going to let go of this anger for me?" Dumbledore's voice was tired.

"Good question Headmaster." Harry sighed then frowned. "Although, it has proved useful."

"What do you mean?" Dumbledore's eyes grew intense and worried.

Harry rubbed his chin thinking. "Your name did come up in my chat with Voldemort."

"What do you mean chat." Dumbledore looked alarmed.

"I mean he talked I listened. I talked he listened." He shrugged and it seemed to Harry that the worried look in Dumbledore's eyes had changed to fear. There was dead silence in the room. Nobody seemed to be breathing.

"What did you mean your anger for me was useful?" Dumbledore slowly asked.

"When your name came up, if I focused on my anger and there was a lot less pain in my scar." Harry said as if it was no big deal and sipped his tea. He could see a shudder move around the room. Dumbledore's hand shook as reached for his teacup. "Where are Ron and Hermione?" Harry looked around.

“They went with Fred and George and Arthur to the store for some supplies.” Remus said stiffly. He looked like he wanted to say more but couldn’t form the words.

“Harry, I think it is best if I start giving you Occlumency lessons myself.” Dumbledore said quietly.

“No thank you, Headmaster. I had enough of that last year.” Harry answered just as quietly.

“I must insist, Harry. You have to stop these contacts.” Dumbledore said firmly.

“With all due respect, Headmaster. This isn’t Hogwarts, I don’t have to do what you say here.” Harry said stubbornly. If it was possible the silence deepened in the room. Nobody had ever spoken to Dumbledore like that. “And actually, I have been practicing this summer, at the Dursleys. It’s easy to clear your mind when you have absolutely nobody to talk to for distractions.”

“You’re wrong, Harry, for the present, I am your legal guardian here in the wizarding world.” Dumbledore told him.

“What do you mean for the present. Going to dump me off on someone else again?” Harry glared at the man.

“Harry!” Mrs. Weasley scolded.

“Actually Remus was named in Sirius’s will to be your guardian but the Ministry doesn’t think a werewolf is a suitable caretaker for ‘the boy who lived’.” Dumbledore ignored Harry’s anger.

“I guess I have no choice then.” Harry shrugged and drank the rest of his tea. “I have a letter to Professor McGonagall to write, if you’ll excuse me.” Rising he gave a nod to the room and turned to leave.

“I will be here at one o’clock tomorrow for your occlumency lesson.” Dumbledore said but Harry didn’t turn around to acknowledge what the headmaster had said as he pushed through the kitchen door.

Hooting softly Hedwig flew down to the desk where Harry sat writing. "I'm almost done. This was harder than I thought." A pile of crumpled parchment littered the desk. "But I think I've got it now." He blew on the glistening ink to dry it. Then he rolled it and tied it to Hedwig's leg. Harry stroked her. "Safe flight." Hedwig gave another hoot and flew out the window.

"Hey, Can't you keep out of trouble when I'm gone?" Ron opened the door and closed it quickly. "Mom's in a right state."

"What about?" Harry asked innocently, throwing the wads of paper into the wastebasket one at a time.

"Believe it or not I think she's mad at you." Ron wondered. "You must have done something awful for HER to be mad at YOU." He stared at his friend. "She was going on about you being rude to Dumbledore."

"Ah, I thought it might come around to him." Harry nodded. "I had words with him but I don't remember being rude to him." He thought for a moment. "Well, maybe that last part."

Ron gazed at Harry for a long time. "Okay, don't tell me. I'm only your best friend."

Harry tried hard to keep a blank face. "IF, I tell you, you have to swear, on your family name, not to tell a soul." He gazed into Ron's stunned face.

"I promise," Ron said quickly.

"Not even Hermione. If I get a hint she might know. I promise, I'll use everything in that box of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes on you. And then order another round." Harry glared at him. Ron swallowed and nodded. Harry motioned him closer then looked up at the walls around the room. He spotted a familiar painting. "Hang on." Harry grabbed the frame from the wall and dumped it out into the hallway. Phineas Nigellus's voice raged in protest. Harry ignored him as he sat

back down. "Okay, here's my plan." In low whispers Harry spoke while Ron's eyes grew as large as saucers.

"Blimey, Harry." Ron ran his hand through his hair. "Risky."

"Yeah tell me about it." Harry nodded as he picked up the last crumpled bit of parchment. "Oh, I have something else to tell you." Harry laughed at the look on Ron's face. "It's not that bad. I just got done writing to McGonagall about what NEWTS I'm going for. I told her I wouldn't be taking Potions this year."

"But Harry, to be an Auror, you have to take Potions." Ron insisted.

"Ron," Harry sighed and gave a wry smile, "Think about. One of two things is going to happen. I die, if that happens, I certainly won't need potions." He held up his hand to stop Ron from interrupting. "If the other happens and I survive, destroying Voldemort, I think I'll be done fighting dark wizards." He saw the strained look on his friend's face. "And if by some chance I still want to be an Auror, do you really think they'll reject me after killing the 'Dark Lord.'" A smile flickered on Harry's face.

Ron broke out in a nervous laugh. "I can see your point." He scratched his temple. "Anything else I should know?" He snorted. Ron's face fell when he saw Harry considering.

"Not at the moment." Harry laughed then sighed. "So what's there to do here anyway?"

"Not much. Want a game of chess?" Ron asked glancing around for the game board. "What's that?" He pointed to the trunk.

"My Mom's. Remus was going to help me open it." Harry told him. "I wonder if he would want to try now? Come on we'll play chess later." They went in search of Lupin. Soon the three of them joined by Hermione and Ginny were bending over the old chest in the middle of Harry's bed.

"I'm positive Alohomora won't work." Remus straightened up and pulled out his wand. "I guess I can see what happens with a tap or

two.” The man swallowed. “Stand back everyone.” The rest of them scrambled back to the door. He raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Not anything too horrible, okay Lily.” He tapped the top of the trunk. Before he had uttered a single word a loud hiss issued and an orange mist engulfed him.

“Remus!” Harry bolted forward but fell to his knees laughing. Ron, Hermione and Ginny howled.

“What’s going on in here? Oh my.” Mrs. Weasley opened the door and started stifling a snicker. “What happened Remus?” Before her, Remus stood with long floppy shoes, brightly colored pants held up by bright green suspenders. His oversized patched shirt had a frilly ruff around each sleeve and neckline. Bright pink hair stuck out in a halo around his face, which was painted white with a huge red smile and a large red nose.

“Just a charm from an old friend.” Remus tugged at the red rubber nose. It wouldn’t come off. He tried pulling off the floppy shoes. He might as well have tried to pull off his foot. “Ah, well done, Lily. Well done.” He shook his head resignedly. “Wonder how long this lasts?” No one looking at him could keep from laughing long enough to say they didn’t know.

“I’m sorry, Remus.” Harry finally managed to gasp. “Oh, my ribs hurt.” He set the trunk back on the floor by the desk. “I’m assuming you aren’t going to have another go at it.” He laughed.

“You assumed right, Potter.” Remus growled.

“I thought clowns were supposed to be happy.” Harry ducked as Remus chucked a pillow from the bed at him.

Chapter 10

There was a lot of laughing at the dinner table that evening. The spell the trunk had put on Remus had not worn off. Lupin endured a lot of good-natured kidding from everyone. But the main topic was still the attack on the village. Mrs. Weasley looked annoyed the adults spoke about the battle in front of the Ron, Ginny, Harry and Hermione, but she refrained from saying anything. In fact Mrs. Weasley was being oddly cool to Harry. Harry suspected she still thought him disrespectful to Dumbledore and was waiting for the right moment to tell him off.

After listening to Kingsley Shacklebolt version of the strike on the town, Harry asked. "Why Ottery St. Catchpole? Why that place?" He watched as the order members eating with them exchanged troubled looks. Harry waited, growing a bit annoyed at the hesitation in answering his question.

"Well, it's kind of obvious don't you think?" Moody growled. "They were after the Weasleys."

Even though Harry had guessed that this was Voldemort's purpose his stomach gave a lurch to hear it spoken aloud. "Yeah, I wondered about that." He sighed and stared at his piece of lemon pie and he pushed it away.

"It's not your fault, Harry." Remus said his nose honking at the end of the sentence.

"I know." Harry said softly. "Can they all stay here? They'll be safe here won't they?" Harry looked over to Moody.

"As safe as any place can be these days." Moody said gruffly. "And as for staying, that's up to you and Lupin."

"What?" Harry was confused.

"Sirius left us the house Harry," Remus said, the nose giving a soft honk.

Staring a long time at Remus, Harry couldn't think of anything to say and just nodded. For some strange reason, all of a sudden, Harry felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of what he was facing, defeating Voldemort. The whole world's fate, not even just the wizarding world, rested on him. The longer Voldemort was alive, the more followers and more power he would accumulate. But there was no way he could challenge him now. No way he could put a stop to the destruction and killing that he knew lay ahead. Harry put his face in his hands and rubbed his eyes. He didn't care everyone was looking at him. He was too used to being stared at. How? How was he going to do this thing? This prophecy, had it really sealed his fate? Did Dumbledore know how he was supposed to defeat Voldemort? Harry felt a familiar resentment towards the headmaster rise inside him. Lifting his head out of his hands with intention of talking to Remus, Harry saw the faces of the others quickly look away. All except Remus but Harry found it very difficult to start a conversation with the man's clown face. So instead Harry pulled the pie back to him and started eating it.

"Ah, so, Harry, can we stay here?" Ron asked giving Harry an encouraging smile.

"Oh, sure as long as you don't bug me too much." Harry grinned back. His face felt strange as if it had never smiled before. There was a quiet laugh at his joke but it was forced like his smile. An awkward silence hovered over the kitchen but was broken when someone rang the doorbell. Sirius's mother started screaming her curses. Lupin jumped up to close the curtains and Mr. Weasley went to see to the door.

Fred and George came in grinning. Mr. Weasley looking a bit put out came in behind them. "Sorry we're late. Took us forever to count all our gold." Fred said checking the pots on the stove for leftovers.

"Nice look Remus." George eyed the man as Lupin came in and sat down.

"Sort of over festive for everyday wear don't you think?" Fred spooned some stew into a couple of bowls Mrs. Weasley had handed him.

After Remus explained what had happened. The twins looked at Harry impressed. "Your Mum did that?" George whistled.

Fred leaned in to look at Lupin. "Would you mind?" His nose honking as Remus drew away from the too close scrutiny.

"Nothing personal Remus, It's just a masterpiece. It's flawless." Fred sat back and looked thoughtful "Any idea on how long this will last?"

"No," Remus honked shortly.

"Oh come on Remus." George pointed his spoon at him. "You knew Harry mum in school. Surely she did something similar during that time?" All eyes were now on Lupin, who was thinking.

"Now that you mention it. I do remember something. A girl looked like geisha," Remus closed his eyes. "That lasted a whole week." A loud mournful honk ended his words.

"Wicked." Fred laughed. "Harry, would you mind if we had a go at the trunk?"

"You want to look like that?" Harry laughed pointing at Lupin.

"In the name of research, sacrifices have to be made, Harry my boy." George sighed. "We didn't get where we are today by avoiding possible embarrassing situations." A laugh issued from around the room.

"Laugh if you will, but George and I will be laughing all the way to the bank." Fred warned them.

"Be my guest. Only don't try anything that would damage what's inside the trunk, okay?" Harry told them.

"Wouldn't think of it." George looked insulted. "Brilliance like this," he gestured at Lupin. "Must be studied, preserved and yes, even worshiped." He said reverently.

The twins finished their dinner quickly. Then Harry led the way up to his room followed by Fred, George, Ron, Ginny, Hermione Mr. Weasley and Remus. For a long time Fred and George studied the trunk on the bed, making humphing noises or pointing something out to the other. The watchers began to get impatient.

“Well, do something.” Ron prodded. “Or are you just going to look at it all night.”

“Patience. Haste makes people look like clowns.” Fred said without looking up.

Ginny giggled as she sat down at the desk near the bed. Her eyes strayed to pictures on the desk. “Are these your parents Harry?” She asked picking up one. “I’ve never seen a picture of them.”

Harry came over to look. “Yeah, that’s my mum and dad.” He nodded. “I guess I should get some frames and hang them.”

“You look a lot like your mother.” Ginny glanced to Harry then to the photo.

Harry snorted. “Most people say I look like my father.” He looked over her shoulder at the picture.

“Well, yes, you do have black hair that sticks up that way. But I think you look more like her, specially around the eyes, and I don’t mean just the color.” Ginny waved her finger over the picture then touched Harry’s cheek bone. “Right through there.” She smiled.

Harry smiled back at Ginny and felt a little flutter in his heart from her touch that surprised him. Fred and George distracted him though by quickly backing away from the trunk; it had begun to hiss again. Harry and Ginny make a dash for the other side of the room. A purple mist engulfed Fred. When the mist cleared howl of laughter rocked the room. Fred’s face was painted white but he wasn’t a clown, he was a mime.

“Wow, It changes.” George studied his brother’s make up and costume. “Very impressive.”

Fred opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. He raised his eyebrows, also amazed. He moved to look at the ones laughing behind him and found he had to pretend he was in a box. The laughter roared louder.

"I wonder how she did that?" George stared at the trunk and scratched his forehead. "Charms that do transformations like that usually don't have that long of life span. But this spell is as strong as when it was cast, years ago." He seemed to be talking to himself. "I wonder how many different transformations she put into it? Very difficult." He took a deep breath and pulled out his wand. "Well, I am in the presence of greatness." He bowed to the box and gave it a tap with his wand. The chest glowed and for a moment Harry thought George had managed to unlock it but a hiss issued and the twin was swallow up by a green mist.

Everyone waited for the mist to dissipate. George was revealed. He turned slowly around. A flowered frilly dress flouncing as he turned. His face was overly made up, like some cosmetic seller gone crazy. Long false eyelashes blinked above blushing pink cheeks. Moss green blue eye shadow extended to his eyebrow. His lips were caked with a dry looking dark red lipstick with a black beauty mark next to his upper lip. But the feature that caused the loudest gasp was the overly large bosoms that seemed to make a sloshing sound when he moved. Ron dropped to the floor laughing so hard his face was red and he was gasping for air.

"Well," Harry took deep breaths and wiped his face. "At least Fred has a date for tomorrow." Fred tried to grab Harry but he was forced to move like he was walking against a high wind.

In the morning Harry woke suddenly. He sat up and listened but couldn't hear anything. His heart was beating fast. He had thought he'd heard his name called. Probably dreaming, he thought. After a quick shower he went down to the kitchen. Nobody was up. It must be early he thought. He cooked a quick breakfast then left to explore, his house. His wandering brought him to Sirius's room. For long time he stood outside the door with his hand on the doorknob, not able to enter. Closing his eyes he finally turned the knob and the door

swung opened slightly. Harry stepped into the room. Instantly tears came to his eyes, eyes still closed. Sirius's scent still was strong in the room. With his jaw set he opened eyes. He peered through the tears at Sirius's things. Nothing seemed to have been touched. A pile of clothes lay in the corner near the door and a dressing gown was thrown across the bed.

"It's hard isn't it?" Remus said softly but it still made Harry jump. "Sorry." Lupin was back to his normal rumpled self.

"Yeah," Harry agreed tears now spilling down his cheeks. "Does it ever stop hurting?" He whispered. Harry felt Remus's hands on his shoulders and the man lean against him.

"Yeah, eventually it dulls." Remus sighed. "But then it comes back sometimes as fresh as the day it happened. It's something you never truly get over. You cope with it and go on."

"I was afraid of that." Harry sniffed and wiped his face. "I'm worried I'll end up like you Remus."

"What? A werewolf?" Remus asked confused.

"No." Harry's voice lowered as if speaking his fears aloud it would make them happen. "I'm afraid I'll end up alive with my best friends dead."

"Oh," Remus squeezed Harry's shoulders. "Death doesn't just happen because Voldemort is alive, Harry. People lose friends and loved ones all the time and Voldemort can't take credit for it." He dropped his hands as Harry turned to face him. "Death is a part of life, Harry. You can't stop people from dieing even in the wizarding world."

"That's sort of what I told Aunt Petunia." Harry said thoughtfully.

Remus put an arm around Harry's shoulders grinning. "We must be very wise to have both come up with such a profound thought." Harry gave him a sidelong gaze.

“You’ve been hanging around Fred and George too long. You’re beginning to sound like them.” Harry smiled, leading the way out of Sirius’s room.

“You know, some people might think that was an insult but I find it quite flattering.” Remus said as they walked back down the stairs to the kitchen.

At one o’clock Dumbledore arrived. Harry was waiting for him in the drawing room. “Good afternoon, Harry.” Dumbledore said courteously as he closed the doors. Harry merely nodded at him. He saw Dumbledore sigh. “Still angry Harry?”

“I have a lot to be angry about.” Harry said indifferently.

“I suppose you do.” Dumbledore stared at Harry as if trying to determine what was really going on. Harry didn’t meet the man’s eyes but looked off over his shoulder. “Occlumency, then.” Dumbledore drew his breath. “You said you have practiced over the summer. Let’s see what progress you have made. Clear your mind.” Dumbledore withdrew his wand. “Ready? Legilimens.” He cried.

Harry made no attempt to stop Dumbledore probing his thoughts. In fact he focused on the more disturbing memories from when he was very young. A child of about four, alone in a dark cupboard, thunder rattling the house as the boy shook in terror. He was three and tried to climb onto his uncle’s lap but was roughly pushed away. A grade school classroom flashed by, Harry had earned a top mark but nobody cared about the ribbon the teacher had given him, his aunt had thrown it in the bin. Then image after image of Harry, at various ages, being shoved brutally into the cupboard flashed through his mind.

“Trying to punish me for leaving you with your aunt and uncle, Harry?” Dumbledore lifted his wand away.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” Harry said with a satisfied look on his face.

"Yes, you do." Dumbledore returned. "Never the less, this lesson is rather pointless unless you try to block me from your mind."

"At least that we can agree on." Harry met Dumbledore's eyes. "Why didn't you keep me?"

"What do you mean?" Dumbledore asked taken aback.

"I mean, instead of leaving me the Dursleys, you could have protected me from the death eaters and Voldemort. And don't try to tell me you couldn't have." Harry warned.

"I? Look after a baby?" Dumbledore chuckled slightly at the thought. "Harry, I'm an old man, I couldn't take care of you. Not the way you needed."

"Oh and I need the way the Dursleys treated me." Harry glared. "Very convenient excuse, this age thing. You seem to use it a lot."

"Perhaps I do." Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "Harry, I feared if you grew up in the wizarding world you would be as arrogant as Voldemort, and as dangerous."

"As arrogant as my father was at my age? Well, at least that is a better excuse. Still doesn't balance though." Harry shook his head and held up his hands like scales. "Being cared for." Harry indicated his right hand. "Verses being treated like dirt." He lifted his left slightly then dropped it as he raised the right. Dumbledore looked distressed and tired. "I think I, better than anyone else, understands what Tom Riddle went through being raised in a muggle orphanage."

With those words Dumbledore seemed alarmed. "Do you feel sorry for him?"

"Yes, I do." Harry nodded. "Who protected him? Who talked to him when he had to go back into the muggle world for two month? Probably nobody. Although I doubt the orphanage was any where near as bad as the Dursleys."

Dumbledore cleared his throat and gazed at Harry with a furrowed brow. "You are beginning to worry me Harry. This path of anger and resentment you are taking." He shook his shimmering white beard a bit. "Once you get too far down that road, it is almost impossible to return."

"Perhaps." Harry nodded but seemed distracted by his thoughts. "Tell me, unless it's a big secret, how am I supposed to defeat Voldemort? We never quite got around to that. This power the Dark Lord knows not?"

"I think even you know what that power is. But how to defeat Voldemort, I'm afraid it not something anyone can tell you how to do." Dumbledore sighed.

"So, I have to figure that out on my own. You're a big help." Harry snorted.

"I think it will be sometime before you are faced with that challenge." Dumbledore assured him.

"As he gets more followers and stronger." Harry added frowning. "There's no way I'll be able to catch up with his power."

"You have the power just not the knowledge." Dumbledore stated tentatively. "Harry, you must practice occlumency. Shall we try again?"

"I won't try to stop you." Harry told him calmly, looking him in the face.

Dumbledore looked irritated. "Harry, we have to get through this wall you've put up between us." His annoyance was replaced with uncertainty. "I can't change the past. I don't know what else to do?" The growing anger on Harry's face alarmed Dumbledore.

"Last June you said you knew how I felt." Harry seethed and glared at him. "If you really knew then, how freaking hard is it to figure out what I need from you, now?" Harry started shouting. "Because, if I have to tell you, it comes from me, not you."

Nodding slightly, Dumbledore eyes were misty. "I see." He sighed looking very bewildered. "I really haven't a clue, Harry."

"Then get one." Harry snarled and wrenched open the door and stormed out of the drawing room.

Chapter 11

"Here are the rune dictionaries you wanted, Harry." Hermione came into Ron's bedroom, where he and Harry were playing a game of chess before going to bed. Dinner that evening had been a quiet and subdued meal. Mrs. Weasley kept looking at Harry and opening her mouth like she was going to say what was on her mind but then would stop and pick at the food on her plate. Remus had left on Order of the Phoenix business so no one was there to defuse the tension.

"Thanks Hermione." Harry looked at the books and sighed. "Looks complicated."

"Not really." Hermione adjusted the belt to her dressing gown. "But I really don't see why you want them. I didn't see any runes on that trunk."

"Well I thought if I came across something we haven't noticed, it couldn't hurt to check." Ron's knight taking his bishop distracted Harry.

"I suppose not." Hermione sat down to watch the match. Crookshanks jumped up onto her lap, purring. "Ron said you aren't going to take potions. Why not?"

At this moment Ginny came in with Cleo. Crookshanks streaked out of the room. "Chicken cat." She laughed.

"He'll get over it. Soon, I hope." Hermione sighed.

"You in trouble," Ginny grinned at Harry.

"What?" Harry looked puzzled.

"Mom's muttering to herself and I know she's just waiting for Dad to get home." Ginny nodded knowingly.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Oh no. Double-teaming you, that's almost as bad as a howler."

"What did I do?" Harry asked worried.

"Come on Harry," Ginny cocked her head. "Everyone knows you yelled at Dumbledore again."

"I'll say this once." Harry's voice was calm and not the bit least angry. "I don't want to discuss Dumbledore."

Silence hung in the room for a long moment. "Right," Ron finally said and he turned back to the chess game without looking at Harry.

"So why aren't you taking potions, Harry?" Hermione asked again.

"I'll tell you later, Hermione." Harry gave the smallest of glances toward Ginny and saw a flare of anger in her face.

"I wish you three would stop treating me like I'm five." Ginny glared at them with her hands on her hips. "I'm not a little girl, you know."

Harry sat back and gazed thoughtfully at her. She wore no dressing gown and even though her nightdress covered everything, it curved softly in all the right spots. "No, you certainly aren't a little girl." He gave her a sly smile. She went pink.

"Potter, would you stop leering at my sister and move." Ron gave him an impatient look.

"I'm not leering!" Harry moved a knight. "I'm appreciating."

"Looked like leering to me. Check." Ron snorted.

"No, Weasley, that's the way you look at Hermione." Harry shot back and moved his king. He glanced at the girls, both whose faces were flushed but neither face was as red as Ron's.

"I have never leered at Hermione." Ron protested. He moved his queen.

“Oh, I must have been mistaken. Check.” Harry grinned. Would this be the first time he beat Ron? But Ron’s attention snapped back to the game board and in five moves he checkmated Harry.

“I thought I had you distracted enough.” Harry laughed. The two girls still stared as if Ron and Harry had suddenly sprouted two heads.

“You guys.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “So Harry, the question was; why aren’t you taking potions?”

“It has to do with the you know what.” Ron said softly.

“I heard that.” Ginny glared at him. “What’s the you know what?” Nobody said anything. Ron and Hermione turned to Harry who was staring at the chessboard.

“I think we have to tell her, Ron.” Harry looked into his friend’s eyes. “She’s too close not to know.” Ron met his gaze and gave a slight nod. “Sit down Ginny.” He gestured to the empty chair. He told her about the prophecy. To Harry’s surprise Ginny didn’t seem horrified or shocked. He gave her a questioning look.

Ginny shrugged. “I figured that out long ago? I mean why else would you-know-who have tried to kill you as a baby if you weren’t going to be a threat to him in the future?” She shrugged again. “I don’t understand why it such a big secret. What use could he make of it?”

“I asked Remus to check into it. He hasn’t said he found an answer yet.” Harry studied Ginny for a moment. “It does figure doesn’t it?” He said thoughtfully and rubbed his forehead. “But to answer your question Hermione,” Harry told her the same thing he had told Ron but in a more diplomatic way. Even though his words were softer, she looked rattled by the answer.

“I see.” Hermione managed finally. She seemed at a loss for words but was saved from replying by Mrs. Weasley coming in.

“Bed time. Ginny! You shouldn’t be running around without a dressing gown.” She glared at her daughter.

“Oh Mom. It’s too hot to wear a dressing gown.” Ginny rolled her eyes. As she turned she kept a steady hand around the kitten on her shoulder. “Goodnight all.” And Harry couldn’t help noticing the gentle sway of her hips as she left with Hermione.

“Not leering eh?” Ron grinned at him.

Harry blushed and grinned as he stood up. “Like I said, just appreciating the view.” He saw a startled look on Mrs. Weasley’s face. “Goodnight.” Ron snickered as he left.

Harry didn’t really feel like sleeping so he decided to read through more of his mother’s letters. The box must have been magically enhanced for it held more letters than a normal carton of the same size. He pulled a thick envelope out of one end. It was addressed to Petunia Dursley. Harry frowned then opened the letter. This was the letter Aunt Petunia had mentioned. His heart started pounding, his mother’s last letter. He swallowed hard and opened it up.

October 21, 1995

Dear Petunia,

I know Vernon doesn’t like the owls but I just had to write. James and I must take Harry and go into hiding. Voldemort is looking for us and I don’t know how long we’ll have to stay hidden.

I’m sending a small trunk to you to keep safe for me. Don’t mess with it much. I can’t tell you much more about it with out risk. Owls aren’t the most secure postings so I’ve sent it by the postal service. If I were you don’t even tell your husband about it. I think it will just upset him.

I wish you all the happiness in the world. I know we haven’t been very close in many years but I hope you can find it in your heart to wish the same for me.

Love,

Lily

P.S. If things go bad, please give the enclosed letter to Harry. I know he will survive.

Harry's hands shook as he turned over a yellowed envelope he had pulled out with the letter. In his mother's hand was his name written on the front. For a long moment he stared at it barely able to breathe. He was about to open the envelope when he noticed some markings on the letter he had just read. Runes! Snatching up the letter Harry studied them. He looked between his mother's letter to him and a possible key to unlocking the trunk. Finally he put the envelope with his name on it under his pillow. Harry didn't think he could handle that right now.

Soon he was sitting on his bed with Hermione's dictionaries opened before him, scratching out a possible answer out. It wasn't that hard he thought. "Hear nothing, see nothing, and say nothing." As he doubled and tripled checked the translations there was a knock at his door. "Come in." He answered looking up. Harry almost grinned when he saw Mr. and Mrs. Weasley enter looking very serious.

"Harry, Molly and I would like to have a word with you." Mr. Weasley began. "I know we don't have any real authority over you but we would appreciate if you would listen to what we have to say."

"Of course," Harry nodded trying hard not to smile. "I can think of no one whose opinions I value greater." He motioned to the chairs near the desk. "Please sit down." Mr. and Mrs. Weasley took the seats he offered.

"Now Harry," Mr. Weasley began with a deep breath. "This attitude you have with Professor Dumbledore, it is deeply disturbing to everyone."

"Mr. Weasley, I told you. It's between the Headmaster and me. Okay?" Harry said firmly.

"No, Harry it is not okay." Mrs. Weasley countered. "You may not know it but when you upset someone it has an affect on everybody around them."

"If he's taking our problem out on other people, I'm sorry. I've made of point of trying to keep it just between us." Harry said.

"It's not so much he's taking it out on other people, Harry." Mr. Weasley explained. "Dumbledore's energy and strength radiate to others and when that is depressed there is a direct affect on people around him.."

"Harry, it isn't like you to hold a grudge like this." Mrs. Weasley chided. "I just don't understand why you are acting this way."

"I appreciate your concern. And I am sorry if it is bothering other people." Harry said earnestly. "But anger isn't something I can turn on and off like wand light."

"No I don't suppose you can." Mr. Weasley nodded. "But Harry, please, holding on to this resentment is not healthy for anyone. And despite your anger at Professor Dumbledore, he can be trusted and he does have your best interests at heart."

"I will, think about this," Harry nodded soberly then he couldn't help break into a grin. "I've never had a heart to heart talk before. Well, unless you count the time Uncle Vernon came into my cupboard and said I could move into Dudley's spare room."

"What do you mean your cupboard?" Mrs. Weasley asked frowning.

"Where I slept, before I got my Hogwarts letter." Harry looked puzzled. "But I thought you knew that."

"I knew you were put in it for punishment but I never knew..." Mrs. Weasley looked angry. "I never knew you had to sleep in there."

"Yep, spiders and all." Harry shrugged looking down at the parchment with his translations on it. "Uh, I know this is asking a lot but I came across these runes on one of my mom's letters." He

showed the markings to the Weasleys. "Here's my translation. I've checked it about four times, I was wondering if one of you could try it on my mum's trunk?"

"I don't know Harry," Mr. Weasley eyed the trunk critically. "It wouldn't look well if I had to go into the Ministry looking like a clown."

"I understand." Harry looked disappointed.

"Well, I don't have to worry what I look like." Mrs. Weasley smiled kindly at Harry and pulled out her wand.

"If you want to wait until Hermione looks at the translation I'll understand." Harry offered her a way out.

"I'll have a go at it." Mrs. Weasley held out her hand for the translation. Harry gave it to her. She walked over to the trunk and studied it for a moment and then said. "Hear nothing, see nothing and say nothing." Then she tapped it with her wand.

The trunk glowed golden for a long time but again there came a hiss followed by a red mist, which surrounded Mrs. Weasley.

"Molly?" Mr. Weasley gasped weakly, waiting for the vapor to clear. As his wife turned around his jaw dropped. Harry gaped. No longer the frumpy mother of seven children. Molly Weasley looked as if she had stepped off the cover of some high fashion magazine. She was absolutely gorgeous.

Chapter 12

Wind whipped his feathers. He was racing with the west wind. The need to out fly it was great. Danger flew behind him. A cry echoed from far below, barely heard in the rushing wind.

Darkness replaced the flying dream. Harry slowly opened his eyes. This wasn't his bedroom. His scar burned but not over whelmingly. He listened. Everything was quiet and calm. Voldemort was sleeping. The fact that Voldemort did anything as normal as sleep calmed Harry's mind and emotions. Apparently the dark wizard was not aware of his presence. Harry tried to keep all emotions from his mind. Quietly he willed the body to rise. To Harry's surprise it did. Now he sat on the edge of the large bed in a finely furnished room. Harry slowly looked around trying to keep as unobtrusive as possible.

A desk in the corner was littered with many letters. Many ripped to shreds. The fire burned low and only glowing embers lit the room. A snake lay curled like a dog on the hearthrug where an overstuffed chair stood. Harry raised his eyes to the portrait on the wall above the mantel. The pointed face and blond hair was very familiar. It just had to be a Malfoy. Harry couldn't keep the surge of hate from his mind at the name of his nemesis. A searing pain shot through his scar. Voldemort awoke.

"So you think you can possess me, Harry Potter?" Voldemort tried to seem amused but Harry could feel a slight fear.

"I didn't come here on purpose." Harry managed through the agony of his scar. "We just happen to be on the same wave length tonight."

"Perhaps." Voldemort said. Harry could feel his attempt to push him away. "What is it that you want? It is late."

"I do have a question." Harry didn't know how long he could keep Voldemort from him. He tried focusing on Dumbledore but the anger wasn't there at the moment. "What did you do during your summer holidays from Hogwarts?"

“Odd question.” Voldemort had stopped his pressuring of Harry’s mind in surprise. “Why would you want to know what I did in a muggle orphanage?” Harry focused on the summer after his first year at Hogwarts, the bars on the windows, being fed through the cat flap. “What was that?” Voldemort asked very curiously.

“My first summer holiday.” Harry felt the pain in his scar lessen, as he was able to center his mind on his resentment at being left with the Dursleys.

“Interesting. I was never locked up.” Voldemort considered. He gave Harry a flash of doing chores with other children.

“So why are you so angry at muggle borns? Just because your father was a git?” Harry felt Voldemort anger rage. It felt like his head would split.

“Why? Muggles should be our slaves Potter. Look what they did to you.” Voldemort seemed to have calmed his momentary flare up and said calmly “Power is everything Harry Potter.”

“I suppose it is.” Harry knew he couldn’t keep this contact up much longer. He wondered if Voldemort felt any of the pain he was experiencing. “Power comes from many sources though.” He again felt a surge of anger mingled with fear from the wizard, followed by Voldemort attempting to force his way into Harry’s mind. With every bit of strength he had left Harry shoved himself away.

Harry lay in his bed shaking with pain. Sweat rolled down his forehead. Since nobody had come rushing into his room, Harry realized he must have kept quiet during this meeting with Voldemort. For a long time Harry lay waiting for the pain to fade and his body to quit shaking. Finally he managed to sit up and open his eyes. Hedwig’s white feathers stood out in the dim light of the room. She hooted softly.

Still feeling very shaky Harry decided to go to the kitchen for some tea. Slowly he walked down the steps in the dark, feeling the way down with his hand on the rail. There was a light in the kitchen and someone sat at the table when he entered.

“Harry?” What are you doing up?” Remus asked softly.

“Just need some tea.” Harry’s voice was hoarse.

“Harry?” Remus knew something was wrong the minute Harry stepped into the light of the candle.

“I’m alright. I just had a dream.” Harry waved him away and slid onto a chair still shaking. Remus looked at him closely then hurriedly made him a cup of tea.

“Harry, what did you see?” Remus asked intently watching the teen.

Rubbing his scar, Harry didn’t answer for a while. “I didn’t see very much. Talked to him.”

Remus looked startled. “Talked to him?” He said it very slowly as if trying the thought of casually talking to Voldemort out.

“Yea. Didn’t learn much. He had been sleeping.” Harry sipped his tea. “I never thought of him sleeping.” He commented.

“Harry, you have to stop these contacts. They’ll be the end of you.” Remus sounded worried.

“If the pain wasn’t so intense.” Harry didn’t seem to listen. “I could manage it better.”

Remus sighed tiredly. “Please Harry, listen to me. You don’t have the knowledge to keep control of the situation.” There was a plea in his voice that made Harry look up and he was surprised to see tears standing in Remus’s eyes. “I can’t loose you too.” he whispered. The man looked down at his shot glass.

Then Harry wondered why Remus up in the middle of the night, drinking. But the dejected slump of the man’s body answered the unspoken question. Remus had been thinking about his friends that were gone. “I’m sorry Remus.” Harry said softly. “But since it’s up to

me to vanquish Voldemort, the more I can learn about him, the more weapons I have.”

The man took a swig of the shot glass and sighed. “I suppose. But the more you can learn about occlumency, that will add to your weapons too.”

“Back to that eh?” Harry yawned and drank some more of his tea. He didn’t want to get into his fight with Dumbledore. He searched around for some other subject. “I keep wanting to ask; what’s happened to Kreacher? I haven’t seen him around at all.”

“Well, since he is bound to the Black Family house, he would have been bound to serve us.” Remus started.

“What do you mean would have?” Harry sat back.

“Instead of serving a werewolf and a half-blood he decided to fulfill his dream.” Remus snorted. “He magically stuck his head next to the other elf heads and then decapitated himself.” He made a slashing motion across his throat. Harry looked horrified. Remus nodded. “Nasty mess. Took us weeks to clean it up. And the smell.” The man shuddered. “Full moon was the day afterwards and the scent of blood stays in the memory of a werewolf longer than anything.”

“Wow,” Harry didn’t know what to say. “At least we don’t have to worry about him, I guess.” He finished his tea and stood up. “Don’t stay up to late, Remus.” He patted the man on the back as he past.

“Yes, mum.” Remus smiled as he watched the young man leave.

“I tell you, Ginny, it’s just not right.” Ron raged as Harry came down to breakfast that morning. Hermione sat beside him trying not to burst out laughing. Ginny looked annoyed at her brother.

“What’s not right?” Harry spooned out some porridge into a bowl, grabbed a spoon and sat down beside Ginny.

“Parents snogging like teenagers. That’s what.” Ron flushed with indignity.

"I think it's sweet." Hermione smiled at him. "To still be in love after all these years, and after seven children."

"Well, they shouldn't do it where we can see them." He countered. "And she didn't even look like Mom, so that makes it even worse."

Harry started spooning porridge into his mouth to keep from laughing. He glanced sideways at Ginny and she was doing the same. At that moment Mr. and Mrs. Weasley came into the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley still looked glamorous. Mr. Weasley eyes followed her ever move, even after he sat down. The room got very quiet. Ron kept shooting disapproving looks at his father. After Mr. Weasley finished his breakfast he rose to leave.

"Well, I'm off Molly." He put a hand on her back and nuzzled her neck. She giggled and pushed him away. "You all have a good day." Mr. Weasley said smiling as he pulled on his cloak.

"I'll let you out Arthur." Mrs. Weasley almost giggled again and followed him out of the kitchen.

"Probably off to snog some more." Ron glared and when the others burst out laughing he flushed and said no more.

Author's notes: Thanks for all the reviews. What is in that trunk? I'd look but I'd probably turn into a banshee or something. Checkout a Harry Potter Ficlet I did a year ago.

Trust Changes Nothing. Id 1282791

Chapter 13

"I'm sure she saved these chairs just so we'd have something to do." Ron rubbed his nose with the end of his paintbrush, leaving a bit of sea foam green on the tip. Some how he had managed, in the very short time they had been painting to have his hands, arms and face splattered with paint.

"I thought so too." Ginny said behind Harry. She was much neater at painting than Ron but still had several drips running down the handle of her brush to her hand. "But I found out she just bought the chairs yesterday from a muggle shop."

"Maybe the order has new members." Hermione suggested. She was meticulous. No paint of ventured further than the bristles of her brush. But she was only a quarter of the way finished with her chair. "So they need more seating."

"Why wouldn't they just conjure the chairs?" Harry asked without looking up from his work. He was used to refinishing things. Painting quickly without drips, spills or other imperfections that would have caused the Dursleys to punish him. Not a speck of sea foam green touched him or his clothes and he was nearly two thirds done with his chair.

"I dunno. Think they'd tell us anything?" Ron snorted. Harry was done in a short time then helped the others finish.

"These are rather boring aren't they?" Harry looked at the chairs critically. "Let's put some decoration on them." He walked over to a shelf with many paint cans and picked out some colors.

"That sounds like fun. What kind of decorations?" Ginny asked, dumping her large paint brush in a can of cleaner and picking up a smaller artist's brush.

"Well, should we make them all the same or different?" Harry considered as he stirred the paints.

“Different but similar.” Hermione grinned. “This does sound like fun.” She looked annoyed at Ron as he grumbled.

“Yeah loads of fun. Like painting all summer was loads of fun.” He rolled his eyes. “You should get out more Hermione.”

“You don’t have to help.” She glared at him.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t help.” Ron quickly shifted ground. “I’ll help, I really don’t mind.” He reached for a brush. “Just tell me what to do.”

After practicing on parchment, Harry quickly divided the tasks. He gave Ron the job of drawing a brown curvy line that would be a vine. Ron didn’t prove adept to do anything more complicated. And Harry constantly had to remind him not to put too much paint on his brush. Hermione and Ginny drew in the leaves while Harry painted several colorful blooms along the vine. They had just finished the last chair when Mrs. Weasley arrived to call them to lunch. Her glamorous look had faded.

“Aren’t you finished yet?” Mrs. Weasley asked then she saw the chairs. “How wonderful. These chairs are just a work of art.” She beamed at them. “I can’t believe you did all this. Well done. Just beautiful.” Mrs. Weasley then looked the four of them over and offered to clean the paint from their hands with her wand. She frowned at the amount of color on Ron and found she had nothing to clean off Harry. Well, let go eat lunch.”

The fried chicken tasted good after working all morning, Harry thought as he tore into a leg. Remus sat down looking tired. He held out four envelopes. “Book lists have arrived.” He announced.

“Oh good. I can go and get everything after lunch.” Mrs. Weasley said.

Harry read over his list. He looked to Mrs. Weasley “Any chance we can go to Diagon Alley this year?” He asked.

“I’m afraid not dear.” Mrs. Weasley shook her head. “It just wouldn’t be safe.”

"Figure as much." Harry sighed. "I wanted to pick up some other things besides school stuff. And I really wanted to see Fred and George's shop."

"Maybe some other time. But you make a list of what you want and I'll pick it up for you." Mrs. Weasley patted his arm.

"Thanks Mrs. Weasley." Then a squeal erupted from Ginny.

"I'm a prefect!" She held out her badge. "I can't believe it."

"Ginny!" Mrs. Weasley cried and grabbed her daughter into a tight hug. "How wonderful."

"Do I get something like Ron did?" Ginny looked expectantly.

"Of course you do." Her mother said, pride dripping from every word. "What will it be?"

Ginny thought for a long time. "I guess a new broom. If I'm going out for chaser a new one would be great."

"I better go get ready to leave if I have another broom to buy this year." Mrs. Weasley said with delight. "Harry write what you need on the back of your school list." She reminded him as she left.

"Good work Sis." Ron held his thumb up.

"Good job." Remus said nodding at her.

"Congratulations, Ginny." Hermione hugged her.

"Well done Ginny." Harry smiled at her and Ginny looked at him almost apologetically.

"Thanks everyone. I can't believe Dumbledore didn't make you prefect Harry." Ginny said grumbling in his behalf.

"I don't think I'll have time. Being the new Gryffindor Quidditch Team Captain will keep me plenty busy." Harry grinned as he held out the armband for his quidditch robes.

Ron whooped and pounded Harry on the back. "That's great mate! Couldn't have gone to a better choice."

"I'll need all the help from you I can get Ron." Harry laughed. "You definitely know more about the different positions than I do."

"I'll help you all I can." Ron assured him.

"I sure wish I could go to Diagon Alley even more now." Harry said. "I could pick out some quidditch books and formation diagrams at Flourish and Blotts. I don't know if your mom will know what to pick out."

Remus smiled. "Think about it Harry. Molly has had five sons into quidditch. She would have to be a brick wall not to have picked up enough knowledge to buy books for you."

"I never thought of that." Harry said sheepishly then laughed. "I guess so." So with a lighter heart he wrote out his shopping order.

As Mrs. Weasley left Grimmauld Place, Albus Dumbledore came in through the front door. Everybody seemed to be tense and looked from the headmaster and then to Harry.

"Time for your occlumency lesson Harry." Dumbledore pointed to the clock. Harry shrugged indifferently and led the way to the drawing room. After he entered Harry turned to face Dumbledore.

"Are you going to try to block me from your mind this time Harry?" Dumbledore studied the teen.

"Not likely Headmaster." Harry said politely. Dumbledore sat down onto the sofa and stared fixedly at him.

"Do not think I have ever met anyone as stubborn as you have been as of late." Dumbledore finally commented.

"I can think of one person, Headmaster." Harry said, sinking into an armchair by the window.

"I assume you mean me." Dumbledore said considering then nodded. "I have been adamant about many things. I agree to that point. I also presume you are referring to what ever has caused this anger in you." When the familiar resentment flared in Harry's eyes Dumbledore added quickly. "I am working on figuring out this problem between us Harry." He assured him tiredly "Although my progress has not been as good as I had hoped.

Harry just looked at the old wizard with sullenness on his face. The urge came over him to rub his prickling scar but he didn't want to in front of Dumbledore. Instead he rubbed his eyes. The headmaster studied the young man sitting before him. Neither spoke for a long time. Harry often met the headmaster's gaze but didn't waver in his expression.

"Since you will not take part in the lesson," Dumbledore finally broke the silence. "Would you to tell me of this talk you had with Voldemort?"

"I have no good reason to keep it from you Headmaster." Harry said courteously. The jab did not go unnoticed by Dumbledore, who sighed but didn't answer. For the next ten minutes Harry told him of his recent exchange with Voldemort. The old wizard was not impressed.

"Harry, you must practice occlumency. But practicing it alone is not enough. I can not impress on you enough, how dangerous these talks are for you and all around you." Dumbledore warned sternly.

"Perhaps." Harry said vaguely. "But I have learned a lot from the visits. If I could just stop the pain." He broke down and rubbed his scar. "I could control things so much easier." Harry said almost as if forgetting Dumbledore was in the room with him.

Dumbledore left his seat on the sofa and bent over Harry with his hands on the arms of the chair. He bent his knees so his face was

level with Harry's. "Harry, please. I know I have made mistakes about things I should have told you long before this year. And for that I deeply apologize."

Harry gazed into the old face. "It's not about what you didn't tell me." Harry said quietly. Seeing confusion in Dumbledore Harry added. "But you are closer than you have been in the past. You just don't want to admit it and until you do there can be no understanding between us." The anger flared so much in Harry's face Dumbledore stood up and stepped back.

"At least that's a clue." Dumbledore nodded then sternly added. "I can not force you to try to keep me from your thoughts. Even without your cooperation, I will continue to meet with you until you decided to participate." He swept from the room with a quick "Good day to you." Obviously Dumbledore wanted to depart before he could provoke Harry's anger further.

Before putting out the light, Harry sat on his bed staring at an envelope in his hand, his mother's letter, to him. He hadn't been able to open it yet. He didn't know why. There was no doubt in his mind it would make him cry. But Harry knew that wasn't the reason he hesitated. For his last few days at Grimmauld Place Harry had slept with the unopened letter under his pillow. He hadn't told Ron or Hermione about it. But sometimes when he was with them Harry thoughts shifted to the letter. Maybe, he would open it tomorrow, Harry started to put it under his pillow then stopped. Tomorrow they would return to Hogwarts. There was a lot less privacy in the tower room than here.

Slowly Harry turned the letter over and looked at the wax seal. He frowned. The L blending in with the letter P had an oddly snake-like appearance to it. He shook his head berating himself for being paranoid. Breaking the seal he pulled out two sheets of parchment. Tentatively Harry unfolded them to read;

October 21, 1981

Dear Harry,

My son, I'm writing this letter to you because things are not well in the world. And even though you sleep peacefully before me, I know some day you will not. How do I know this you may ask? Your father would answer I must have seer blood in me somewhere in the past. He can't accept something as mundane as muggle intuition.

I love your father dearly but he has an annoying arrogance attitude toward muggles. I don't even think he realizes when he says things not in the best of tastes. But I find a lot of wizards born in the wizarding world act the same. It's one of those little idiosyncrasies one has to put up with when muggle born. I hope you, born into the wizarding world, do not grow up to believe, to be magical is to be better than other beings.

So what does my muggle instincts tell me? Nothing good I'm afraid. For some reason, I do not believe your father or I will see you grow up. One can only escape death so many times before their luck runs out. But I am sure you will become adult and it breaks my heart to know I won't be there to see the man you will become.

And that is why I am writing this letter. To give you advice? Perhaps. But how can I furnish a lifetime of motherly advice on a bit of parchment. I know I can't. I suppose my wish is to make some connection with you and perhaps you will find something useful in my writings.

We have gone into hiding from a dark wizard named, Voldemort. Some people put lord in front of his name but I will not. He has killed my parents and your father's whole family. Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, has told us part of a prophecy, which may involve you. There is another boy who it may refer to, Neville Longbottom. His parents are very powerful Aurors.

Little Neville will no doubt be a very powerful wizard when he grows up. He's already levitating things and he's the same age as you. I'm sure you will be friends with him. Alice and I used to get together quite often since our baby boys were born on the same day. I think they are going to go into hiding soon too.

James thinks prophecy has to be Neville because of his pure blood. But I know it's you and I am terrified for you.

My dear Harry, if you are reading this when you are a little boy, I hope there is someone to hug you through with the scary parts of this letter and through the bumps and bruises of daily life.

If you are older, I hope you are strong and can handle what is your fate. I hope you have friends whom you can lean on when times are hard. I will tell you this. I have no doubt you will be able to accomplish what you need to do.

I wish I could be there when you start Hogwarts or you have your first crush. I could help you figure out girls. Between you and me, your father was clueless on that account. I know your father would love to see you play quidditch. But I know we'll never see these things in your life. So I have to imagine you doing and loving, not worrying too much about the future. It will come when it comes.

So now for the advice part of this letter, and even though you had the nerve to say 'dad' before 'mum' as your first word I'll give you a thought from your mother to you.

If you someday have to journey where the darkness dwells remember the light is always there, waiting to be called.

Now my son I have to end this letter. It seems so short but it took forever to write.

I will always be with you.

Love never-ending,

Mom

P.S. I almost signed it Lily. Silly me.

P.P.S About the trunk, to open it you will have to put some things together and think about my advice. It will help and I didn't even mean it to but it's funny how things work out like that.

Love

Mum

Harry wiped his eyes and smiled slightly. What he had feared was nothing. Instead his mother's words had comforted him, in a way. This was his mother. Not a girl attending school but his mom talking to him. The little bits of humor she had put in helped ease the emotional tide his mother was riding, so apparent in parts of the letter. Harry took a deep breath and folded the letter. He got up and put in his trunk with the letter address to his aunt. "Good night Mom." Crawling into bed Harry was soon fast asleep.

A sense of watchfulness filled him as he hovered over the forest. The same dark wood he had seen in another dream. Movement on the ground caught his keen sight. He dove calling for the charge.

The screech of Sirius's mother woke him. A lot of voices filled the air. He got up and dressed then locked his trunk. Harry mentally went through a checklist in his mind. The only thing he hadn't packed was the tall perch Hagrid given him for his birthday. Deciding to leave it here at Grimmauld Place made his luggage a lot easier to manage. He stepped out in the hall with the loud wails of Mrs. Black jarring his ears. But he managed to hear another cry between her curses.

"I can't find her. Oh, Cleo, please, come here." Ginny called desperately as the adults brought the school trunks down to the front door. "Mom, I can't leave without her."

"Ginny you can't miss the train. She'll be fine here." Mrs. Weasley was in her usually back-to-school day temper.

"But Mom, she'll only be a kitten once, and I'll miss it if I leave her here." Ginny sniffed and set her arms in a defiant look. "I won't go without her."

"What's up?" Harry put Hedwig's cage down on top of a trunk. The snow owl hooted softly.

“Cleo freaked when the painting went off. And now we can’t find her.” Ron said as he placed his owl next to Harry’s cage. Hedwig clicked her beak at the small hyperactive bird.

“Cleo!” Ginny called over the screams of the painting. “Here, kitty.” Tears started down her face as she kept calling for the kitten.

“I’ve got an idea.” Harry touched her arm. “Once things quiet down Cleo is bound to come out. I’ll leave Hedwig and she can bring Cleo. Cleo isn’t that big and I’m sure Hedwig can carry her. In a box or something of course.” Harry turned to the owl and opened her cage. “You wouldn’t mind, would you Hedwig?” The owl hooted soothingly and flew on to Ginny’s shoulder and nibbled her ear.

It was hard to tell who looked more relieved at this solution, Ginny or Mrs. Weasley. “Thank you, Harry.” They said together.

After a hurried breakfast a large group set out. The Ministry of Magic had provided cars for the journey to Kings Cross but they had to walk two blocks away from Grimmauld Place so as not to give any clues of the headquarters’ whereabouts. Lupin walked in the lead followed by Harry and Mrs. Weasley. Along side Ron was Tonks. Next came Hermione and Kingsley Shacklebolt. Sturgeous Pugmore escorted Ginny and Moody clunked along behind them.

When they had turned onto the second block. Harry saw the three ministry cars parked on this side of the street. As they approached the cars Harry had a strange feeling. But this sensation wasn’t from his scar. Which twinged slightly but not anything for him to really consider it a bother. This was something different.

Trying hard to appear casual Harry slowly scanned the area. Cars whizzed by on the street before them. Across the road on the sidewalks Harry saw two ineptly dressed wizards stood in front of an apartment building. More guards he thought. Looking down the block on his side there were only a few people walking toward the station at the end of the street. The driver of the first car had been leaning against it when they walked up. He tipped his hat and reached to open the door for them.

Again Harry felt disquieted and he listened as Mrs. Weasley pushed him forward. Harry saw her eyes dart about. Then he heard it. Above the bustle of the street and the rattle of cars, a sound that made him freeze before stepping into the car. How he knew, Harry couldn't say but he was positive he had heard the distinct sound of a wand being drawn from a robe.

Mrs. Weasley pushed again at his back "Get in Harry, hurry."

Above! The sound had come from above he knew it! Harry looked up across the street to the taller building. Red eyes glimmered in a darkened window then a flash of green emerged.

"GET DOWN!" Harry yelled and pulled Mrs. Weasley to the curb with him as he dropped. The spell broke the sidewalk where she had been standing. The air exploded with wizards apparating around them. Noise and confusion, both muggle and magical, hailed over Mrs. Weasley and Harry. Hands pulled Harry and Mrs. Weasley to their feet and shoved them into the ministry cars. Before they had even sat upright the cars pulled away and into traffic.

"Are you all right Mrs. Weasley?" Harry saw her hands were scraped and she was shaking.

"I'm fine. Thanks to you," Mrs. Weasley gave him a weak smile. "I was supposed to be protecting you."

"I've learned from you, families protect each other." Harry grinned and Mrs. Weasley grabbed him for a hug. When they arrived at Kings Cross a host of wizards lined the street as they got out of the car. Mrs. Weasley hurried Harry through the station and on to platform nine and three quarters. Only when they saw the scarlet steam engine puffing on the tracks did Mrs. Weasley breathe a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness we made it." She still looked a little worried.

"I hope the others are all right." Harry looked toward the gateway. They didn't have long to wait. In five minutes Ron, Ginny and

Hermione, along with their escorts came through, all looking scared and troubled.

“Is anybody hurt?” Harry asked, looking around at everyone.

“No, everybody is fine.” Remus assured him giving Harry an intent going over. “What about you two?”

“I’m fine. Mrs. Weasley cut her hands.” Harry told him.

Remus examined her hands and conjured bandages around them. “That should hold you until we get back to headquarters.”

“Thank you Remus.” Mrs. Weasley smiled. “And thank you again, Harry.” She hugged him and gave him a kiss.

“What did you see, boy?” Moody asked gruffly. Both normal and magical eye looking at Harry.

“I felt something.” Harry frowned thinking.

“You should have told us if your scar was hurting?” Moody growled impatiently.

“It wasn’t my scar.” Harry shook his head. “I just felt like, I dunno, there was danger, when we walked up to those cars. Then I heard,” he hesitated to say it because it sounded so unbelievable. “I heard a wand being drawn.” Moody still stared at him unblinkingly.

“You heard a wand drawn?” Tonks echoed. “With all the noise around us?”

“I know it sounds weird.” Harry said. “Then I looked up to the building across the street and saw, Voldemort and then a flash of green.”

“You say your scar didn’t hurt, even though Voldemort was that close?” Remus asked.

"I felt a twinge but not anything to indicate he was nearby." Harry told him. "Or even planning anything." Lupin didn't say anything but he looked worried. Then they all turned to someone hurrying toward them.

"Molly?" Mr. Weasley called. He had just emerged through the barrier. His face was flushed and worried. "Are you all right? I just got the news"

"We're all fine, Arthur." She reassured her husband with an embrace. "Thanks to Harry. We both owe him our lives now." Harry felt his cheeks flush as Mr. Weasley shook his hand.

The whistle to the train blew. Mrs. Weasley quickly returned to being a mother. "Everyone on to the train. Hurry! Have a good term. Be careful." She said softly to Harry.

Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione scrambled on to the train and waved to the people on the platform as it started to move. Then it rounded the bend in the track and the station was gone.

Harry turned to say, "Let's go get seats" to see three guilty faces looking at him. He had forgotten. All three, Ron, Hermione and Ginny, were prefects. They would have to go down to the first car to learn of their responsibility this term. His face fell and he swallowed trying to coax a smile on his lips. "I guess I'll go get a seat." His voice didn't sound too strange. "See ya later?"

"Of course you will." Ginny said looking glad he wasn't too unhappy.

"As soon as we're done we'll come find you, Harry." Hermione looked so concerned Harry had to laugh.

Hermione, I'm not a little lost kid." He said grinning. "I think I can manage until I see you again." They all laughed.

"See ya in a bit, Harry." Ron clapped him on the shoulder then with Ginny and Hermione made their way down to the front of the train. Harry watched them go and sighed. He picked up the end of his

trunk and Hedwig's empty cage and pulled it in search of empty compartment.

Chapter 14

A short way down the corridor Harry found an almost empty compartment. A lone boy sat inside. Harry opened the door. "Hi, Neville. Mind if I sit with you?"

"No," Neville flushed. "Where's everybody?"

"Ron and Hermione are prefects. And Ginny made prefect this year too." Harry said stowing his trunks and Hedwig's empty cage in the luggage rack.

"Wow. That's great for her." Neville said as Harry took the seat across from him.

"So how was your summer?" Harry asked the round face boy.

"Not bad. Gran made me a greenhouse for my birthday." Neville smiled. "It's great."

"Oh yeah. Your birthday is the same as mine." Harry said almost to himself.

"How did you know that?" Neville looked puzzled. "I mean it's in the summer so we really don't celebrate it at school or anything that you would know."

Harry looked a long time at Neville. "My aunt gave me some things that belonged to my Mom and there was a letter in it." Harry hesitated. He hadn't even told Ron and Hermione about the letter from his mom. And he had just read it last night. He looked at Neville then decided. "Hang on I'll show you." Harry stood up and rummaged into his trunk and pulled out the letter to his aunt. Then he removed his mother's letter and handed it to Neville. "My mum mentioned you." Harry smiled.

Neville unfolded the two pieces of parchment and silently read the letter. Harry saw a tear leak down the round face. "Wow Harry. This is..." He looked up, his eyes still misty. "Priceless."

"Yea, it is." Harry agreed. He watched Neville re-read it several times. For some reason he didn't mind sharing this with Neville. His parents were in St Mungo's, insane, because of Voldemort's death eaters. Neville better than anyone would know the value of a mother's letter to her son.

"What's this trunk she's written about?" Neville pointed to the letter.

Harry told him of the interesting affects the trunk had put on the people who had to tried to open it. Neville laughed at the image of Lupin as a clown and dropped the second page on the floor.

"Ooops." He picked it up stared at it for a moment. "I thought this was blank at first." Neville looked closer at the edges. "But look, Harry. Here on the border." He handed it back to Harry. "Are those runes?"

Harry examined the markings. The lines seemed to go right off the edge of the page on each of the four borders. "They kind of look like they might be." Harry shook his head. He had looked through Hermione's rune dictionary enough that he should be able to recognize at least one rune but he couldn't. "They look incomplete." The minute he said it something clicked.

Harry pulled out the letter addressed to his aunt. At the bottom were the runes he had translated. So close to the edge the ink looked clipped off. Harry fitted the edges of the parchment together. "Yes!" Harry cried. "Look. They match up." He pounded Neville on the back. "Thanks Neville. I think I'll let Hermione translate these. Looks a bit tricky."

"You would have seen it eventually." Neville looked embarrassed. He handed the letter from Harry's mom back to him, almost reluctantly. He watched Harry studying the letters. "So your mom was right. The prophecy was about you, not me."

Looking up from the letters, Harry saw, not the scared boy fighting off a Snape boggart but the determined young man that had practiced so intensely in the DA meeting last year. Harry nodded. "Yeah. It's me." He grinned. "You will be a powerful wizard Neville. If my mum said

so, you can count on it. So I expect you to guard my back.” To his surprise Neville’s eyes smolder with a courage not seen there before.

“You can count on that too.” Neville straightened his shoulders and nodded. Harry stuck out his hand. Neville grasped it with his and pumped, grinning.

The sun shone through the dirty windows. The day reminded Harry of his very first trip to Hogwarts. The witch with the lunch trolley stopped and Harry bought a several caldron cakes and pumpkin pasties. He saved something to eat for Ron, Hermione and Ginny, wondering when they were going to show up. Then around two o’clock the door slid back.

“There you are.” Ron came noisily into the compartment and plopped down beside Neville. “Hi Neville.” He immediately grabbed a pumpkin pasty and began eating.

“Hi Neville.” Ginny followed her brother in and sat down by Harry.

“Have a good summer Neville?” Hermione closed the door and squeezed beside Ron.

Neville told them about his greenhouse. “And I got a brand new wand.” He pulled it out. “Willow, containing one phoenix feather. Gran couldn’t believe I got phoenix feather wand. They usually go to really powerful wizards.” Neville saw Harry raise an eyebrow and flushed.

“Harry, what were you talking about back at the station?” Ginny asked. “About hearing a wand drawn?”

Harry sighed. Then he explained again the sensation of danger, how above all the noise he had heard the wand being drawn. “When I looked up, I saw red eyes and a green flash.” You know the rest.”

“You were attacked coming to the station?” Neville eyes looked stunned. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Not on purpose Neville. I knew once these three showed up we’d be discussing it.” Harry shrugged. “I didn’t really want to go through it twice.”

“Strange your scar told you nothing.” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“I think it’s stranger he’s getting these weird feelings of danger?” Ron said then added at a glare from Hermione. “I mean what would cause that?” Harry shrugged.

“Maybe it’s like what your mum had Harry. What did she call it, in the letter? Muggle intuition?” Neville suggested.

Three sets of eyes turned to Harry. He knew this without even looking and waited for the onslaught. “What letter?” Hermione demanded.

Neville went bright red. “I’m sorry Harry. I never thought they wouldn’t know about it.”

“That’s okay Neville.” Harry laughed. “I was going to tell them about it. I just read it for the first time last night. So don’t you three look at me like that.” He chided. While he had lunch Harry had put the letter back in his trunk so it wouldn’t get anything on it. Harry opened his trunk and handed the letters to Hermione. “My Mom’s last letters.” He said briefly.

Hesitantly, Hermione opened his aunt’s letter and read. Then she unfolded the note from his mother. Tears started running down her face. “Oh, Harry. This must be both wonderful and well, bittersweet.” She handed the pages to Ron wiping her face.

Ron scanned down the pages, by the time he was finished he blinked furiously. “Don’t know what to say Harry.” He mumbled and handed them to Ginny.

Harry felt Ginny lean against him, shaking. He looked down at her she was crying. “Hey don’t get them wet.” He gently kidded putting an arm around her and giving her a squeeze and pulling the pages from her grasp.

Through her tears Ginny smiled at him. "Sometimes, Potter you are about as sensitive as my brother, Ron." She laughed at the highly offended look he gave her.

The door to the compartment slid open. Before Harry could even look up to see who it was the parchments were snatched from his hand. "Hey," One look at the pointed pale face made him reach for his wand. "Give that back Malfoy."

"Move another muscle Potty and it's dust to dust." Draco Malfoy pointed his own wand at the letters in his hand and slowly started to crumple them into a ball. His cronies, Crab and Goyle laughed loudly.

"Give them back Malfoy." Harry's heart beat wildly at the thought of losing his mother's letter.

"Accio," The letters flew from Malfoy's grip into Neville's hand. Nobody had noticed he still had his wand out. Before the intruders had a chance to say another word he jinxed all three of them.

"Way to go Neville!" Ron cheered, thumping him on the back.

"Thanks Neville, I really owe you one." Harry grinned as Neville handed the pages to him.

"Just watching your back, mate." Neville grinned back with a look of great satisfaction.

Harry smoothed out the pages to show Hermione the runes. "Wow, this is brilliant, Harry." Hermione fitted the pages together and held them up to the light. "I'd never thought of making a code like this." She frowned. "But it's hard to decipher in this light. Why don't I wait until we're back at school to translate this? Do you mind?"

"No. We wouldn't have time to try to open it anyway, with the feast and all." Harry carefully folded the letters and put them back in his trunk.

"This year is going to be great." Ron said. "Being a prefect I mean. Instead of looking after snotty first years, we get to help the teachers. Run errands, even into Hogsmead during the week if they need something for class."

"Sound like fun." Harry agreed. "Gonna let me use the prefect's bathroom this year?"

"Sure anytime." Ginny said not looking up from the book she had taken out. "I can't believe they didn't last year."

"We did." Hermione and Ron protested.

"Never said you didn't." Harry laughed. The sky grew dark outside the window. Stars flickered by as the train sped on. Soon they were pulling on their Hogwarts robes and the train started to slow.

Stepping on to the station Harry heard the familiar, "First Years this way. First Years over here."

"All right Hagrid?" Harry called and waved. After the jarring beginning last year this year seemed to be going normal. Not counting the attack Harry reminded himself, feeling strange that he had put it out of his mind so quickly.

"All right Harry?" Hagrid waved as Harry followed the crowd to the carriages that would take them to the castle. The thestrals stood in the shafts with their blank vacant eyes. Harry was surprised he recognized the one he had ridden in June. He gave it a friendly pat and it tossed its bony head. He waited for Hermione, Ron and Ginny to catch up to him and Neville. They shared a carriage and it trundled off when the door closed. Soon it stopped at the steps of castle.

The great hall looked as splendid as it ever did. The thousands of candles flickered above the four long house tables set with golden plates. Harry felt this year had to be better than last. People actually spoke to him as he made his way to the Gryffindor table to find a seat. No whispered muttering as of the past year. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan greeted them as they sat down.

“Heard about the attack. Can’t believe it. You four all right?”
Seamus asked concerned.

“We’re fine. Ron’s mom got scraped up but she’ll be okay.” Harry nodded. “Nervy of Voldemort if you ask me.” People around him flinched at the sound of the name.

His attention drifted to the staff table as students continued to file into the great hall. Harry searched for a new face. For a moment he stared at the headmaster. The power and sense of strength Dumbledore usually gave Harry seemed dulled by his resentment of the old wizard. Next to Dumbledore, Harry found what he had been looking for, the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Wearing muted dusty blue robes, a big powerfully built man sat with short-cropped dark hair bristling out under his matching wizard hat, which’s top folded crisply to the right with the tip just above his ear. The wizard sat very straight and his wide shoulders seemed to crowd Professor Snape on his left. The expression on his square jawed face was hard to read. But Harry could see his dark eyes scanning the great hall and studying the students.

Hagrid slid into his seat at the end of the long table. The next moment the doors open and Professor McGonagall led a line of scared looking first years down the rows to stand in front of the staff table facing the students. She placed the sorting hat on the three-legged stool in front of them. Everyone stared at it as a rip near the brim opened and the hat began to sing.

In your mind I’ll take a peek

To sort by deed and thought

For Gryffindor the brave I seek

And courage in the heart

Ravenclaw the wise to teach

With brains to solve mystery

Hufflepuff makes room for all
Who want to learn great wizardry
While Slytherin educates the cunning
With only pure blood ancestry to note
Long ago, and for a time
The dividing did no injure.
But pride and power
Began to climb
And clever Ravenclaw knew
The time had come
For one to say adieu
But gentle Hufflepuff
Would always believe
As friends tried and true
They would find a way.
For all to live together
Gryffindor who taught the brave
Said once to shrewd Slytherin.
Trust our friendship
That's all we need

The anger is nothing
Compared to deeds
Powerful Slytherin answered
True friends we'll always be
However much we disagree.
Yet anger raged uncontrolled
So Slytherin moved out
To save from harm and hurt.
Hogwarts and all its wisdom.
And stained still is the entry
By blood and strife unseen.
Eroding from within
Stone, soul, and spirit.

Nonetheless, I must sort each year
The house for all new student
But anger still flows among
Foe and friends alike
So this I must tell you
Before the midnight hour strikes.

That now in these halls
Dwells the one who must
See the Dark Lord forever fall
Greatly he has suffered,
For the want and death of love.
But like the great blade of Gryffindor
That was tempered by the forge.
The trials have made him stronger
Most powerful will he become
Keen, honed and dangerous
But a force not alone in battle
Against the rising tide of dark.
But one on the edge of a blade,
Long, narrow and sharp.
So listen all ye Hogwarts
Students, ghosts and teachers
Be strong. Stand together
I desperately beseech you.

When the sorting hat fell silent, the students applauded. Harry's face felt hot and he tried not to look at people around him as he clapped. But Harry couldn't help but notice many faces turning, trying to catch a glimpse of him.

“Will I ever get a break?” Harry muttered exasperatedly to Ron and Hermione.

“Sorting Hat’s getting a little cheeky if you ask me?” Ron said in Harry’s behalf.

“Nobody will know it’s you.” Hermione said softly then cut herself off as Harry gave her a warning look to shut up.

Professor McGonagall stared down all the last whispering and started to call the first years to the sorting stool.

“Anderson, John.” A thin boy with red hair stumbled out of line to sit down on the stool. He placed the hat on his head. “Gryffindor!” The hat shouted.

Everyone at the Gryffindor table clapped for the new member as he hurried to the table to take his seat. Harry’s mind slipped out of focus as he thought about the sorting hat’s song. Blood had been spilled in Hogwarts? He wondered about this. Harry wondered if Hermione knew anything about it. He glanced her way. She was looking at the staff table. Obviously checking out the new teacher. Then a name was called that caused Harry’s attention to snap back to the sorting.

“Evans, Mark,” Harry looked around Ron to see the boy Dudley had beaten up one summer sitting on the stool. “Gryffindor!” The brown haired boy sat down on the other side of Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas.

“Hey, Mark,” Harry leaned around his classmates. “Good going.”

Mark’s mouth dropped open. “Harry Potter? What? I thought you went to St. Brutus’s?”

“That’s just what the Dursleys tell everyone. I’m in my sixth year here.” Harry told him.

“Will wonder’s never cease.” The first year eyes were as big as saucers as he glanced around the great hall.

The sorting continued and Ron tapped his fingers on the edge of the table expectantly. When finally the Sorting Hat called. "Hufflepuff." For Zeller, Mary and she hurried to the Hufflepuff table. Professor McGonagall took the hat and stool away and Albus Dumbledore stood up.

"Let the feast begin." He said then the wizard sat back down and food appeared on the tables.

After Harry had taken the edge off his hunger he turned to Hermione. "What's this about blood being spilled in the entry? Anything in Hogwarts: A History?" He asked.

"No, nothing at all." Hermione frowned. "I wondered about that too. Was there a fight that led to someone really getting hurt? Or killed?"

Ron shrugged. "Who else would know but the Sorting Hat? It was there right?" Ron launched into the possibility of a ghost or old painting possibly being present. Harry became aware of Ron eating very carefully this year and not trying to pack his mouth full and talk. It was almost comical to watch him carefully chew bite size pieces with his mouth closed and wipe his mouth with his napkin instead of his sleeve. And equally as entertaining to watch Hermione actually listen to him without interrupting or arguing.

"Oh, that's right." Harry nodded as his attention came back to the conversation. Finally after finishing two helpings of treacle tarts, the food disappeared and the gold plates were gleaming clean again.

Dumbledore stood up. "Welcome to Hogwarts. I have a few start of term notices. First I would like to introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Professor Roger Malahide."

The teachers and students clapped but in a restrained manner. Which was understandable considering their last Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher tried to take over the control of the whole school. The man slightly inclined his head to the applause. Dumbledore continued. "I'd like to remind all students, the forest is out of bounds...."

“Stiff looking bloke.” Ron said quietly, leaning in to Harry and nodding to the new teacher.

“To right.” Harry muttered. “But anything has to be better than Umbridge.”

“Tempting fate mate.” Ron whispered back. Then they heard Ginny calling the first years to follow her. Harry, Ron and Hermione got up and left the table with the others filing out of the great hall. In the Gryffindor common room Ron and Harry said goodnight to Hermione and climbed the stairs to the boys dormitory.

Harry sank into his four-poster bed and sighed with contentment and closed his eyes. A sharp pain shot through his scar. He gasped at the suddenness of the sensation. Enduring the pain, Harry searched for a mind to question.

“So, you escaped again.” Voldemort raged.

“I knew you were there.” Harry told him.

“Don’t lie to me. Your scar did not hurt. I made sure of that.” Voldemort hissed.

“Not the scar. But I knew.” Harry could barely stand the pain. “How did you block the pain to my scar?”

“Tell me how you knew and I might tell you.” Voldemort sneered.

“Muggle intuition, as my mum called it.” Harry eyes watered as the fire shot through his head. Voldemort pressed cruelly to enter into Harry’s mind. Struggling Harry fought to maintain a hold on his own thought. With all his strength, Harry thrust Voldemort away with a last desperate effort.

The dorm room returned. Between the curtains of his four-poster Harry saw through bleary eyes a half moon shining through the windows. Harry lay sweating and shivering. He took deep shuddering breaths to calm his mind. After his heart stopped beating

wildly Harry turned his pillow to find a cool spot for his forehead and slowly drifted off to sleep.

Author notes: Thanks again for all the encouraging reviews. Please be kind with this chapter I did my best with the sorting hat song. It is so hard to rhyme! If I tried to perfect anymore I'd post this chapter in maybe another year.

Chapter 15

"Harry?" Hermione looked startled when he sat down across from her at the Gryffindor table the next morning. "Are you all right?"

"Bit of a head ache." Harry shrugged as he reached for some tea and toast.

"Is it your scar?" Hermione asked. Harry heard Ron's mutter something. "Oh, be quiet Ron. Is it your scar Harry?"

"Yes, Hermione. It is my scar. Happy?" Harry answered irritably. He rubbed his forehead then saw Hermione and Ron still looking at him. Harry sighed. "Okay. Somehow Voldemort was able to block the pain for a short time. Explains what happened when we got to the ministry cars." He sipped his tea and closed his eyes to the pounding in his head.

"Maybe you should go to Madam Pomfrey." Hermione suggested tentatively.

"I'll be alright." Harry nibbled some toast and took a long drink of tea. Professor McGonagall came down the table giving out course schedules. He felt a great sense of relief not to be taking potions. Not having to deal with Snape's sneering. Scanning down the list, Harry saw he had only three classes today. "We'll see get to see what the new Defense teacher is like this afternoon." He commented. Then Harry frowned. At the bottom of his schedule was a note: 7:00 Tuesday and Thursday Occlumency with Professor Dumbledore – Transfiguration classroom.

If Harry felt bad about his schedule Ron looked overwhelmed. He ran his hand through his hair. "Why? Why did I take all these classes? I'll never be able to get through all of these."

"Not with that attitude." Hermione chided.

"You'll help me won't you?" Ron gave her a pathetic look. Harry had to turn away to keep them from seeing him smile.

A whoosh was heard overhead and hundreds of owls flew in dropping letters and packages in front the recipients. Harry watched for Hedwig but no white owl appeared. "Well, Maybe tomorrow Ginny." Harry saw her look sad and worried. "Don't worry. Hedwig will get Cleo here." Ginny gave him the barest of smiles.

"We better go. Transfiguration is our first class." The three sixth years grabbed their book bags and hurried off to the third floor.

"NEWTs are going to be different. I wonder how many sixth years are taking Transfiguration?" Harry wondered as they entered the classroom and found seats.

"Well, I know Neville isn't taking it. He only got an acceptable OWL." Hermione said. "I'm not sure of anyone else."

As if in answer to their question, students from Gryffindor and other houses began to file into the room. Ernie Macmillan, Padma Patil, Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas and Draco Malfoy took seats. Malfoy sat down in the empty seat to the right of Harry. He gave the three a sneering smirk. But Professor McGonagall entered and the room's attention focused on her.

"Welcome to NEWT Transfiguration." Professor McGonagall set her books down on the desk and walked around in front to lean against it. "This first semester you will begin conjuring spell. Which as I told you last year, conjuring is much more difficult than vanishing spells. As you all know it is much easier to take something apart than to put try to it back together." There was scattered chuckling.

"You will start by trying to conjure a very simple black button." McGonagall took her wand out, indicating the students to do the same. Using a small circling motion over left palm she produced a small black button. "Like thus. Concentration is essential. A clear picture of what you want to conjure in your mind is a must. You may begin."

So they began. It was harder. Even Hermione couldn't conjure anything more than a faint dark mark on the desktop. With his head still aching Harry felt he might have well have joined the first years for

all the power he had. Every time he cleared his mind to picture a button the pain in his scar would get in the way.

“Oh no!” Padma Patil had just put holes in her desk. “How can you make something thin air, out of nothing?” She sounded frustrated.

“But Miss Patil, the air is not nothing. It sustains life does it not?” Professor McGonagall corrected her.

Harry stared at the transfiguration teacher as if hypnotized by her words, his head suddenly cleared. Making something from something, he thought. A plain picture of a black button flashed into his mind. With a quick circle of his wand a button materialized. “Yes!” Harry cried in triumph.

“Well done Potter, well done indeed.” Professor McGonagall came over, picked up the button and examined it. “Perfect too. Twenty points to Gryffindor. I might add Mr. Potter, it has been many years since I’ve had any student capable of conjuring anything recognizable on the first day of class.” There was a twinkle in her eye rarely seen by anyone. Harry looked questioningly at her. “Your father and Sirius.” A faint smile was replaced so quickly by the real Professor McGonagall that Harry wasn’t sure he had really seen it. “Now try a button a bit more complicated. Say brass with a design on it.”

Taking a deep breath and at the same time thinking ‘Making something from something’ Harry pictured a shiny brass button with a Hogwarts crest on it. He gave his wand a twirl. A gleaming button appeared. Hermione clapped and Ron whooped. As the teacher examined the new button Harry said. “You know Professor, it’s not really conjuring is it? It’s more like transfiguring the air into something.”

Professor McGonagall gave him a long look. “Figured that out did you?” She smiled slightly then raised her voice. “Mr. Potter is right. In truth you are transfiguring the air into something solid.” She handed the button back to Harry. “Another twenty points to Gryffindor.”

The end of the class Harry had advanced further than any, including Hermione. He could see her growing frustration. Hermione did not like to be second best at anybody. Especially when all she had manage to produce so far was a small lump of black goop. McGonagall turned to Harry. "Try a teacup. It's more difficult but you don't seem to be having any difficulty."

A slight glance to his right Harry saw Malfoy glowering at him. Malfoy hadn't produced anything. Concentrating Harry pictured a steaming cup of tea. With a wave of his wand on the desk, the imagined hot cup of tea appeared.

"My word, Potter!" McGonagall stepped back in surprised. "I said a teacup. Not a cup of tea."

"Oh, but this is what I thought of though." Harry told her sniffing the tea. "It smells alright." He tentatively took a sip and nodded. The bell for the end of class rang. Students started picking up their bags.

"This is very advanced. Excellent work." Professor McGonagall then walking to the desk she turned to the rest of the class. "Homework, read chapters one through four and I'll want a two scroll essay on conjuring to be handed in next week. You may go."

There was the normal scraping and shuffling of students as they left the transfiguration classroom. Standing Harry said to Ron and Hermione, "I need to talk to McGonagall about something, I'll catch up with you later." The two looked curiously at him?

"What?" Ron asked.

"I'll let you know if it works out." Harry smiled slightly. Hermione gave pushed Ron and the pair left the classroom.

"Professor, can I have a word?" Harry strode up to the teacher's desk.

"What is it Potter?" Professor McGonagall looked up.

"I wanted to ask you something. I've been thinking about this a lot." Harry kept his eyes on her face. "Every since I found out my dad was an animagus and Sirius. He added then took a deep breath. "I want to be come an animagus. Would you help me?"

By her expression, McGonagall had not expected this. "I see. It is a different life choice, Potter." Then she smiled slightly. "But I can understand your request. I would be happy to help you to become an animagus."

"Great. Thanks." Harry grinned. "I've read a lot about it in our text books but I can find anything about how to tell what kind of animal you will be come."

"That is because there is no reliable way to tell." Professor McGonagall told him. "One may influence it slightly. It's doubtful one would become an animal that one despises."

"Oh, that makes sense. So, how do I begin? I know there is paper work to fill out." Harry said.

"Yes, I will get you the necessary forms. And we should meet twice a week for lessons on the procedure." McGonagall told him. "If you want to follow me to my office the forms are in my filing cabinet." They left the classroom and walked up the stairs to her office. She quickly found the paper work for him. "Once you have sent these in, the ministry will contact you to give you the go ahead."

"Thanks again, Professor." Harry tucked the papers into his book bag.

"Your welcome. And Harry," He turned to look at her because she rarely used his first name. "I am delighted you want to be an animagus." Harry grinned at her and nodded and headed off to catch up with Ron and Hermione in Charms.

All of the students from transfiguration had entered the charms class joined by a couple more students, one of who was Neville. He joined Harry, Ron and Hermione at the back of the class. Tiny little Professor Flitwick greeted the whole class enthusiastically. "This first half of the year, you'll be learning basic healing charms." He

squeaked. "Even if you are not intending to make healing a career, healing charms are useful for the normal everyday bumps and bruises of life. And if any of you intend to have children someday, you will most certainly need a knowledge of healing."

Learning healing spells required a bit of sacrifice on the part of the volunteer. One student purposely would make a small cut on their hand and the other students would try to heal the wound. Harry noticed Neville seemed to be doing extremely well compared to previous years. He wondered if it was a new wand entirely his own or something deeper. Most students managed to heal the small cut after a couple of attempts. Malfoy found no one wanted to work with him.

"Professor Flitwick?" Malfoy called in the whiney voice Harry hated. "I don't have anybody to heal."

The charms teacher looked around and called to Harry. "Would you please assist Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter?" Harry sighed. He liked Flitwick and didn't want to cause a problem in his class.

"Okay, if YOU promise to keep an eye on him." Harry took the knife and nicked the back of hand with it. "Heal away Malfoy." He gave the Slytherin such an indifferent bored look as he held out his cut hand; Malfoy was too confused to do anything nasty. When on his fourth attempt Malfoy finally mended the skin Harry sighed scornfully. "About time." Malfoy gave him a murderous look but didn't get a chance to retort.

"Very good. Everyone well done." Professor Flitwick clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "For homework please read chapters one and two. And diagram the healing charms discussed in those two chapters." The bell rang for the end of class and they filed out to the great hall for lunch.

"What did you have first period Neville?" Harry asked as he reached for his glass of pumpkin juice.

"Herbology." Neville said. "And we're doing healing plants so it really connects well with the charms lesson."

"We don't have Herbology until tomorrow. " Ron commented after swallowing bite of sheppard's pie. "Wonder why the classes are split up like that."

"Well, you only needed an acceptable OWL to study NEWT Herbology." Hermione told him. "So there probably a lot more people who qualified."

"Oh. I almost forgot." Ron turned to Harry. "What did you want to see McGonagall for?"

For a bit Harry picked at his desert of apple pie then said. "I asked for her help to become an animagus." He saw Ron's jaw drop.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Hermione looked hurt. "You never said a word."

"I hadn't made up my mind yet." Harry shrugged then at Hermione's stare, he confessed. "Okay, I had made up my mind. I just didn't want to say anything until I had the nerve to ask McGonagall for help." Hermione seemed satisfied with that answer.

"What kind of animal do you think you'll be?" Ron asked curiously. "I could see you being a lion or something like that."

Harry grinned. "I really don't know. I'm pretty sure I won't be a dog like Sirius or a stag like my dad." He said thoughtfully shaking his head. Then he gave Hermione an evil wink. "I dunno, maybe a huge spider." Ron recoiled so fast he almost fell off the bench.

"You wouldn't?" Ron face visibly paled. "Look mate, I'll stand beside you in facing you-know-who, dragons, blast ended skrewts and any other foul beast you can mention but that's asking way too much."

Harry and Hermione laughed. "I'm just kidding Ron. I don't think I'll become a spider. I had enough of those in second year too." He fell silent for a long moment. Many times Harry had tried to imagine himself as some animal but couldn't seem to come up with something

that seem natural to fantasize about. He hoped this wasn't a bad sign.

After lunch they headed for the Defense Against the Dark Arts class room. All of Gryffindor's sixth years were there along with everyone from the D.A. club that had been in sixth year. And like a piece of cellophane he couldn't get off his finger, Draco Malfoy slithered into view. But this time his thugs Crab and Goyle were standing on either side of him like bodyguards.

"What did you think of this Malahide?" Ernie Macmillan asked looking at Harry.

Harry shrugged. "Can't tell much from the start of term feast. But he has to be better than Umbridge."

"I keep telling you, don't say things like that. You are just tempting fate." Ron hissed.

"Well, he's late." Hermione checked her watch. "It's five past the hour." Her toe tapped expectantly as she looked down the corridor.

Suddenly the door creaked open. "Enter." A deep resounding voice commanded. The group glanced nervously at each other then slowly went through the open door. There was no light, except one shining down on the students like a spot light. The sound of their footsteps echoed as in a cavernous space. Harry felt his heart beating rather fast in anticipation. Everybody jumped when the voice rang out again. "Stupify." A flash of red light hit the floor in front of them, several students shrieked.

With one quick motion Harry had his wand in his hand and crouched low. He felt Ron and Hermione beside him ready with their wands. At once the classroom filled with light. But it wasn't a classroom anymore. The class was standing in the middle of a large gymnasium. Striding into sight was Professor Malahide. His powerful frame wore a dark blue jumpsuit that reminded Harry of a ninja's but more flow like a robes with a tight black scarf around his head.

"All who have their wands in their hands, front and center." Professor Malahide barked pointing to a place right of him. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville and a few of the DA members filed over to where he pointed. "All those who don't. Ten points from your house." He turned and walked away then after a dozen paces turned to face the students with his feet apart and his hands behind his back.

"I am Roger Malahide your Defense Against the Dark Arts trainer." Malahide nodded. "Yes, I said trainer. This is war and you must be prepared. You will call me Sir, or Captain Malahide with ever answer. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir." The class answered together. Harry felt a strange chill go up his spine. This was too much like Umbridge.

"You will answer in a loud and clear voice. Understood?" Malahide barked.

"Yes, sir." The class called louder.

"You will find suitable clothing for training," He pointed to the ends of the gym. "Women on the right and men to the left. You have five minutes." Everybody seemed frozen in shock. "MOVE IT" He ordered. With the rest of the boys Harry ran to the left side of the room. Behind a half wall they found lockers. Going down the line he found his one with his name on. Quickly he pulled off his robes and put on a robe fatigue similar to the ones Malahide wore but these were kaki green. He found a leather holster for his wand. It strapped around his shoulder and rested so the pocket holding the wand was under his left arm. Taking a couple of practice pulls Harry found he liked this holster.

"Come on Harry." Ron said giving his back a pat as he hurried by. Harry shoved his wand back into the slot and followed Ron to the middle of the gymnasium. All the boys had finished and milled around waiting. Malahide stood staring at them but not saying a word. Presently the girls started to emerge. Hermione hurried over to Harry and Ron looking a bit worried.

When Pavarti and Padma Patil finally emerged and joined the group Malahide stepped toward them. "Who can demonstrate a pushup?" Malahide asked. For once, Hermione did not seem eager to volunteer. So Harry raised his hand. The trainer nodded. Harry dropped to the ground and stretched out and gave a couple of up and down pumps then he looked up to Malahide.

"That's pathetic Potter." Malahide growled. "This is the correct way to do a pushup." He dropped from a standing position and held himself straight seemingly with no effort. "Notice my elbows are straight and my back is straight as if I were still standing." He bent his elbows. "Your nose will touch the ground. And back up to the straight position." From there he sprang back to his feet. "Try that Potter."

Harry did his best to copy Malahide, keeping as straight as he could. "Could be better Potter. Don't worry you'll get lots of practice." Malahide motioned for him to rise and turned to the others. "Those ten points will be the last I deduct from your house. When you screw up in my course. I will tell you to drop. And you will do so and perform the number of pushups I called for. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir." The class called out.

"I can't hear you!" Malahide yelled.

"Yes, Sir." They shouted louder.

Soon Malahide had the whole class in military formation standing at attention. He paced in front of them, correcting their stance and straightening the line. In a half hour the whole class was marching outside. Luckily for Hogwarts students, the constant running up and down the castle's many staircases made them fairly fit, even after the summer holiday.

When the class reentered the gym. He halted them and put them at rest. After a few moments to let them catch their breath, Malahide ordered everyone to hold out their wands. He went through the lines inspecting the condition. When he came across a grimy or dirty wand

he ordered the offender to drop and give him five. Malahide walked back in front of the rows of students.

“That little exercise at the beginning was to see who was on their toes.” Malahide told them. “You should always have your wand within reach. If I stop anyone of you in the halls of this castle and find you have to fumble to get your wand out, I will ask you to drop and give me twenty pushups right there.” He glared at them. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir,” The class answered.

“Now you are all loosened up,” Malahide waved his wand. A long thick rope appeared hanging in front each student. “First one to the top can skive off the rest of today’s training. Go!”

Harry grasped the rope and started climbing as fast as he could, not paying attention to the other students. He kept his eyes fixed to where the rope seemed fastened to the ceiling. In a short time, Harry realized he wasn’t getting any closer to the top. Pausing he hung in the middle to see what was going on. Some of the class was having trouble just climbing the rope. Others like him had stopped climbing, realizing the futility of the race. Harry glanced around at the people hanging from the ropes. It occurred to him most of them were muggle born. Going to muggle primary school, Harry had scaled up ropes in physical education. Evidently magical primary school had no such exercise.

Harry looked up again wondering if there was some way to reach the top. He saw Ron struggling, although the redhead had managed to make it to the middle of the rope. With a grin on his face Harry pulled out his wand. “Windgardium Leviosa.” He floated Ron, who had let go of the rope to the top of the room. With his hands off the rope Ron was able to reach the ceiling. Slowly Harry brought Ron back to the ground.

“Get down here all of you.” Malahide shouted to the class. When the class lined back up Malahide came nose to nose with Harry. “Think that was funny, Potter?”

“No Sir.” Harry kept his eyes staring straight and no expression on his face.

“Then why did you do it?” Malahide growled.

“If I couldn’t make it to the top I thought I’d help a friend up, Sir.” Answered Harry, not blinking.

“Ten points to Gryffindor.” Malahide barked to Harry’s surprise. “Team work is essential. If you don’t have team work you don’t have diddly.”

Malahide turned abruptly away from Harry and addressed the class. “The rope exercise is to improve your grip on your most important weapon, your wand. Loose your wand and you might as well kiss your sorry little bums goodbye.” He paced the lines again. “I see some of you have put on the harness. For those who didn’t drop and give five.” Malahide watched as about half the class including Hermione and Ron dropped to do five pushups.

Malahide slipped to the middle of the group and shouted at Malfoy. “I can count Malfoy maggot! Since you can’t, drop and you give me ten and see if you can get it right this time.” Glowering Malfoy got down and started his pushups.

There was a snicker on Harry’s right side. He knew it had come from Ron without looking. Malahide descended on Ron like a vulture. “You think that’s funny weasel brain? Drop and give me five.” Harry could see Ron’s red face out of the corner of his eye as his friend dropped to do pushups. Growing up with the Dursleys, Harry had learned very well how to keep a straight face through anything.

For the next ten minutes the class practice drawing their wands out. Malahide corrected their clumsiness and gave helpful tips on grips for different wand movements. Then the man had them split them into three groups. Harry tried not to look at the pale blond at his left on his team. “We are going to have a little war game. Who can tell me why I split you into three groups instead of two?”

“So it will be more interesting?” Pavarti Patil suggested when no one spoke up.

“That’s the stupidest answer I’ve ever heard. We are not here to have fun. Drop and give me five.” Malahide stared around for someone else to answer. The class stirred under his glare. A hand went up.

“Potter?” Malahide stepped in front of Harry.

“You split us in three teams because in a real war there are never just two opponents, Sir” Harry said quietly. Malahide stared at Harry for a long time before speaking.

“You are a blooming genius Potter.” The man said quietly nodding. “Fifty points to Gryffindor. Potter is absolutely right. You may know one clear enemy but there are always people undecided as to which side to be on and spies right next to you waiting to stab you in the back. That’s what the third team represents. The unknown element.”

In other circumstances, Harry might have enjoyed the mock fighting but with Malfoy on his team, he felt uneasy and constantly kept checking the position of the Slytherin. Harry didn’t want Malfoy behind him at any rate.

Finally Malahide called a halt to the games and the class lined up again panting. “When you get here on Wednesday, you will get dressed and line up like you are now. Hit the showers.” The students wearily walked to the ends of the gym. Ron looked like he was trying to drown himself as he let the water spray on his face.

“You alright?” Harry asked him a little startled by the look of helplessness on his best friend.

“Yea, I’ve got potions next.” Ron squeaked through the water. “I’m dead tired. How am I going to survive Snape and Malfoy?”

“Oh,” Harry felt bad for Ron and a little guilty he was happy he didn’t have potions. “You will. Hermione will be there for you.” Harry put a little emphasis on certain words and Ron went pink but didn’t say anything.

Author notes: Sakura, Neville knew about the prophecy from going to the department of Mysteries. Harry's mother mentioned the prophecy in her letter but never was it said Neville was told what was in the prophecy. The grinning bit was a punctuation and or clarity problem. He was grinning when telling Neville about him being a powerful wizard. As for the Sorting Hat, maybe the founders should have known Mr. Weasley, "Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain." The thing is; what's been told isn't anything more than Voldemort already knows. That Harry was born to defeat him.

I really wanted to pull off a stiff British military type with a lot of slang that needed translating for the kids but found I'm helplessly out of my element. So you got this Malahide instead.

Chapter 16

Even though there were many students around, Harry felt strange being in the library while Ron and Hermione went off to potions. Nevertheless Harry was glad he had not taken Snape's class. In searching through the shelves for a couple of charms reference books Harry noticed a rune dictionary as he was going back to his seat. As an after thought Harry grabbed thinking if he got done with his other work he could check the rune in his mother's letters. In ten minutes he had a good start on his charms homework. Harry was working steadily when he felt someone sit down on either side of him.

"Hi, Harry." Pavarti Patil smiled at him.

"Hi, Harry." Lavender Brown almost giggled. Harry felt his face flush.

"Hi, Pavarti, Lavender." Harry wondered what this was all about. They were acting very breathy. "What's up?"

"Oh, just doing some Divination homework." Pavarti said in her best imitation of Trelawney's airy voice.

Harry coughed, part to keep from laughing and part because of the heavy perfume that seemed to hover around the two girls like a low cloud. "Charms," Harry indicated his parchment.

"Oh, that's nice." Lavender giggled. Harry was getting more suspicious. What did they want?

"Can I help you with something?" Harry finally ventured since they didn't seem to be in hurry to leave.

"Well, Harry, we were wondering." Pavarti began in her silky voice. "We were wondering if you were going to continue the D.A. club?"

"Yes, you were such a good teacher." Lavender nodded. "Not like Malahide."

"I thought Malahide was all right." Harry looked surprised. "He'll keep us on our toes that's for sure."

"He's too mean." Pavarti's voice quivered. "You didn't yell at us in the D.A."

"Yes, and if you were going to still do the D.A. We thought we'd drop Defense Against the Dark Arts." Lavender hurried on. "We'd learn what we needed to know from you." She smiled sweetly at him putting her hand on his arm.

For a moment Harry sat stunned. "I'm flattered by your confidence in me." He grinned. Harry didn't know what to tell them. He hadn't even thought about the D.A. "But to tell you the truth, the way Malahide is teaching," Pavarti snorted. "I know it's hard Pavarti but just learning to do the spells isn't enough. You have to know how to use them and when to use them under pressure for defense to be worth anything." The two girls pouted and looked very disappointed in Harry.

"I'll tell you what," Harry patted Lavender's hand. "If you still feel the same after Christmas. I'll start up the D.A. again." The two girls exchanged glances and broke into smiles.

"Oh thank you Harry." Pavarti hugged him and kissed his cheek.

"Thanks Harry, you're so nice." Lavender kissed his other cheek.

Harry flushed and straightened the neck of his robes. "You're welcome. Well, I better finish this charms homework."

"Bye Harry," The two girls chorused as they swished out of the library.

Harry couldn't help watching their hips swing back and forth as they left, feeling a little overwhelmed by the encounter. Returning to his work Harry considered Malahide. Yeah, the guy yelled. But other teachers yelled too. Actually Harry found he liked the physical aspect of the class even after just one period. It reminded him of a good hard Quidditch practice. He thought idly looking for the healing charm he was supposed to diagram. Then his eyes snapped open. Quidditch! He was Gryffindor Quidditch Captain! He had to schedule tryouts! And practices! Make up plays Harry began to panic momentarily. Book the field! First things first Harry thought,

cramming his books back into his bag. He hurried to check out his books and to find Madame Hooch to arrange tryouts.

A half hour later Harry was pinning a poster on the Gryffindor board announcing quidditch tryouts on Friday at seven. He took his book bag up to his room to find his mother's letters. Making sure he had the pages lined up correctly Harry carefully looked up the newly formed runes. A feeling of pride welled up in him, something that hadn't happened when Harry had thought of his parents since he had looked into Snape's pensive. But this, he thought was so ingenious. The pages had to be line up correctly to form one new word. Then the blank page was turned to line up again to line up for another new symbol. As George had said, "Impressive." His mother must have been really smart. Harry thought with a wistful sigh. Presently he looked down at his new translation. "Hear no bad, see no bad, and speak no bad." That didn't sound quite right but it did sound familiar. Harry frowned wondering if he should wait for Hermione to check his work.

A sudden streak of recklessness came over Harry. Grabbing his wand he lifted the small chest out of his trunk and placed it on his bed. Drawing a deep breath Harry chanted, "Hear no bad, see no bad and speak no bad." Then he tapped the top of the chest with his wand. The small trunk glow a deep golden and began to quiver slightly but then a silvery blue mist puffed out of the top, surrounding Harry. When it had cleared, reluctantly he looked down to his clothes. He quickly closed his eyes and felt his face burn red. Tights, I'm wearing white tights. Harry groaned. Wanting to get the worst over as quickly as possible Harry went to the mirror just inside his wardrobe. With trepidation Harry opened his eyes. It took a moment for Harry to realize he was looking at himself instead of an old painting, common in the castle. A wide brim hat with a feather reminded Harry of Nearly Headless Nick's. The red doublet and white leggings surely went with that period. He tugged at the large ruffled collar and noticed his hair hung in wavy locks down to his shoulders. Harry looked down at his feet to see white stockings and large buckled shoes. A flush crept up his face again and Harry tried to pull his short pants down. He'd seen swimming trunks that were longer than these things. Then he had an idea. Hurrying to his trunk and pulled out his cloak. He could cover everything with his black cloak. But try as he might

Harry couldn't get the cloak to stay around him. The second he let go of it, the cloak fluttered behind him, as if in a wind.

Resignedly, Harry threw the cloak back into his trunk. Sounds of activity drifted up from the common room. The stomping of feet up the spiral staircase told Harry afternoon classes must be over. The door opened and Harry heard a pause, a gasp and then raucous laughter.

"What's going on in here?" Harry heard Ron's voice over the gasping laughter behind him. "Oh! Harry?" Slowly Harry turned around and saw Ron's face was bright red trying not to burst out laughing. "Uhm, Nice, uhm, hat." Ron lost it and started snickering then broke down laughing.

"Et tu, Brute!" Harry said his eyes opening wide.

"Yea, Harry, Nice hat." Seamus giggled trying to control his laughing. "What happened?"

"Yeah, Nice feather," Dean snickered.

"Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't." Harry froze. What had he said?

Ron looked as puzzled as Harry but he told the other boys about the trunk without laughing too much. Snickering the two dropped their book bags on their beds and headed back down the spiral staircase.

"You look like Nearly Headless Nick." Neville said laughing. "See you at dinner." He hurried out of the dorm.

"Who wanteth food, and will not say he wants it, or can conceal his hunger till he famish?" Harry groaned and sank onto his bed, flopping down.

"I could bring you something." Ron offered with only a couple snickers.

"Delays have dangerous ends." Harry sighed again and stood up.

"We should get a picture." When Harry looked annoyed Ron insisted. "Oh come on. Everyone else had their picture taken." Ron rummaged in Harry's trunk and took out the camera Lupin had given Harry for his birthday. "Nice pose Harry. Got it." He put the camera back. "Ready for Hermione and Ginny? They're probably waiting."

"T'is neither here nor there." Harry shrugged as he followed Ron down to the Gryffindor common room. Harry gritted his teeth as Hermione chastised him.

"You really should have let me look the translation over Harry." Hermione laughed. "You don't look too bad though."

"That it should come to this!" Harry looked over to the girls' stairs; Ginny was in the doorway and had gasped. Harry felt a warm flush in his face again. "O! She doth teach the torches to burn bright." Ginny went red.

"What's going on? Harry?" She stared at him and went up to him for a closer look. "OH, the trunk." She giggled biting her lips a bit to hold herself in and put a hand up to her mouth.

"See, how she leans her cheek upon her hand! O that I were a glove upon that hand, that I might touch that cheek!" Harry felt his face burn but he couldn't do anything about the words spewing from his mouth.

"Come on Romeo," Hermione grabbed his arm and led him out of the portrait hole. "Might as well show you to the rest of the school. It will be less disruptive tomorrow if everyone sees you tonight."

"Why are you calling him Romeo?" Ron glowered as he followed.

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Harry commented pushing aside a tapestry to go down two floors.

"Romeo! Shakespeare. Ron, you never heard of William Shakespeare?" Hermione looked at Ron. "Famous muggle playwright." She added when Ron looked confused. "Harry keeps quoting from his works."

"My word, Potter." Professor McGonagall looked up as the group descended the stairs to the entrance hall.

"Can one desire too much of a good thing?" Harry asked as he gave her a pathetic look, hoping she wasn't going to deduct any points for not being in Hogwarts robes.

"His mum's trunk." Ron quipped still looking strangely at Hermione.

"Ah, that explains it." Professor McGonagall nodded. "Perhaps I can help." She pulled out her wand but before the teacher could attempt a removal a squeaky voice stopped her.

"I would not do that Minerva." Warned Professor Flitwick, his eyes twinkled. "I think Lily would have anticipated someone trying to counter the charm."

Professor McGonagall lowered her wand. "You are probably right, Professor Flitwick. Sorry Potter. Hopefully this won't last too long. Move along into the hall for dinner."

"For ever and a day." Harry sighed and followed the others into the great hall. There was a wave of silence followed by a surge of suppressed giggling and muttering as Harry made his way to the Gryffindor table. Harry kept his eyes on his plate and ate quickly, trying to ignore the remarks.

"You look outstanding Harry." Nearly Headless Nick drifted through the table to sit opposite Harry. "I have not seen a student look this good for hundreds of years. Perhaps you will be a trend setter and those morbid black robes will be replaced with proper attire."

"How bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man's eyes!" Harry glanced at the ghost, hoping he hadn't said anything to upset Nick.

"How true, how true." Nick nodded soberly. His head wobbled dangerously. Nick tugged his collar so it would hold his partially severed head in place.

"Do you know what you are saying Harry?" Asked Ginny sitting at his right. "What it all means?"

"In my mind's eye." Harry gave a little shrug and nodded a little.

"Potter, that has to be the most ridiculous get up I've ever seen." Draco Malfoy sneered at him flanked by Crab and Goyle.

"The common curse of mankind, - folly and ignorance." Harry said, eyeing the three. Everyone around him laughed. "Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under 't. Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" There was another roar of laughter from the Gryffindor table, making Malfoy, Crab and Goyle slink back to the Slytherin table. Harry noticed the students getting the jest of the lines were either muggle born or had one muggle born parent.

When they had returned to the Gryffindor common room, Harry retrieved his mother's letters to have Hermione look at the runes. She studied them and checked her reference books. "I'm sure you have the translation right Harry." Hermione finally nodded. "But it doesn't sound right." She frowned thinking.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked looking up from his potions homework.

"You think there might be another code key page?" Ginny asked. Harry gave her a small smile and nodded for asking the question he couldn't.

"Well, there is a muggle expression, 'Hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil'." Hermione shrugged then brightened. "Maybe that's part of the key Harry! Maybe you had to know that quote to be able to figure out the clues." Hermione said excitedly. "Well? What do you think?"

"Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast." Harry looked doubtfully.

"Oh, Harry, you're not going to be much help until that spell wears off." Hermione sighed.

"Hermione, are you going to help me?" Ron whined. "I don't know why I took potions." He ran his hand through his hair.

"What's the problem?" Hermione looked annoyed at Ron.

"But love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit." Harry said quietly.

Ginny giggled as Hermione and Ron blushed. "You are so right Harry." She put a hand on Harry's arm and squeezed.

Harry looked at her smiling. A warm flutter started from her touch and ended in his chest. He took her hand and said: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate:"

It was Ginny's turn to go red. "Hermione's right. You are impossible to talk to Harry. Goodnight." She pulled her hand from his grasp.

"Good Night, Good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say good night till it be morrow." Harry called after Ginny. He heard a giggle and then her steps running up to the girls' dormitory.

With the wide brim hat Harry found it difficult to get comfortable. Eventually sleep over took him. Again he was flying. Flying for the joy of freedom. He went into a spin and then a loop, testing his wings and exalting in the thrill of the flight. Voices called again. He ignored them. This was his true life. The other was merely a dream.

Authors note: Molly Morrison: I can be taught! I actually knew the difference of animagus and animagi, but I am dyslexic and get things turned around in my mind and unless I get corrected it goes on without me see I doesn't look right.

I also want to thank Mr. Shakespeare for all the wonderful quotes of his I used in this chapter.

Chapter 17

"Harry!" Ron shook him. "You're going to be late."

"I'll not budge an inch." Harry groaned.

"You better." Ron warned. "We've got Herbology in a half hour."

Harry heard Ron leave the room and he sat up. Since he hadn't been able to undress last night, Harry straightened what clothing he could and hurried out of the dorm.

A quick glass of pumpkin juice and a couple of pieces of bacon was all Harry had time to eat for breakfast. With Hermione and Ron, Harry walked across the lawn of the castle to the greenhouses.

"Over here class. Over here," Professor Sprout waved an arm to the advancing students. "We will be cultivating Lion's Tooth today." She pointed to a large pile of green stems with a white puff of seeds at the end. "Who can tell me the uses of Lion's Tooth?"

Everybody looked at Hermione, who had raised her hand. "Lion's Tooth or more commonly know as dandelion, cleanses the blood and liver."

"Ten points to Gryffindor. Quite right. Since the day is so fine, I thought we would work outside." She pointed to the benches set up. "You'll find trays to set up over there." Professor Sprout pointed next to the greenhouse. "Oh, Lion's Tooth does not like dragon dung, much too rich for it's tastes. Potting soil is in the bags."

The breeze cooled his face as Harry piled dirt into the tray. Dandelions! He thought of all the times he had dug the weed out of Uncle Vernon's lawn. And now he was planting them. "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Harry said then sighed. He hoped this charm would wear off soon.

"I should be writing down all the stuff you say." Ron started sprinkling the seeds onto the soil. "Then you could tell me what you meant when said it."

"I think I know." Hermione smiled at Harry who nodded. "Muggles think of Lion's Tooth as a weed. They go to great lengths to rid them from their lawns."

"So, muggles are stupid. What does that have to do with what Harry said?" Ron asked surly. Harry glanced at Ron wondering why he was irritated.

"It's the old beauty is in the eye of the beholder. One man's trash is another's gold. That sort of thing." Hermione said shortly giving Ron a frown for his attitude.

"The attempt and not the deed confounds us." Harry observed while working on smoothing his dirt. He saw Hermione look confused. Ron stared at him for moment then went silently back to work.

After Herbology, Harry, Ron and Hermione headed off to Hagrid's cabin for Care Of Magical Creatures. The three slowed their approach when they saw several crates next to his hut. "That doesn't look good." Ron muttered.

"Morn'ng." Hagrid called then looked at Harry, smiling. "Heard about your mum's trunk. Don't worry, she never did anything that wouldn't wear off eventually."

Harry wished Hagrid hadn't put it that way. "I 'gin to be aweary of the sun and wish the estate o' the world were now undone."

A hearty chuckle came from Hagrid. "I don't doubt that Harry."

"You understood what he said?" Ron asked stunned.

"Sure, I did. Shakespeare, Mcbeath I think. You should read more Ron." Hagrid cuffed him on the shoulder and Ron stumbled into Hermione. He grabbed her to keep from falling. Harry couldn't help but notice the eye contact Ron and Hermione gave each other before

Ron reluctantly let go of her. "Oops, sorry Ron. Gather 'round." Hagrid straightened and addressed the students.

"Who can tell me what these 're?" He pointed to the crates and the class cautiously peered over the edge. Strange rat-like creatures cowered in the corners of the box. On the back of each creature was a growth resembling a sea anemone, its tentacles moved eerily. "Anyone?"

"Murtlap." Harry said then gasped. He had said a normal word. Maybe the charm was wearing off. "Hark! Do you hear the sea?" He sighed, evidently not yet.

"Twenty points to Gryffindor. Two right answers." Hagrid nodded picked one up. It squirmed and tried to bite him. "Not too friendly. Murtlaps live on the seashore. Don't never step on one at the beach. They'll eat yur feet." He pointed to the growth. "That thar lump can be used for all sorts of healing potions and when pickled can help ward off curses." Hagrid gripped the rodent and pulled out a knife. Lavender and Pavarti screeched.

"Calm down you two, I'm not going to hurt it. What you're gonna learn today is how to remove this growth without hurting the Murtlap." Hagrid rested the animal on his large knee and gave a quick scrap with his knife. On the ground the squirming feelers on the growth waved feebly. "See very little harm to the Murtlap." Hagrid showed the class the back of the creature. "Now, you'll want to use your dragon-hide gloves, 'cause them teeth are sharp. And ya don't want to pick up them tentacles with bare hands." Hagrid pointed to a pile of knives and the crates.

For the next hour they struggled trying to remove the growths from the Murtlaps. The creatures squirmed and bit at their gloved hands. Harry thought he'd never get the squeaking out of his ears. They reminded him too much of Scabbers but he didn't mention this to Ron.

At lunch Hermione was the first to notice Harry's hair getting shorter. "I think the charm is wearing off." She smiled. "Try to say something."

"Tempt not a desperate man." Harry said and shook his head. "Not yet." His eyes popped open. "Testing. Testing." He broke into a grin. "I think. Yes, I can at least talk."

"Your costume is leaving too." Ron plucked at his sleeve. "Too bad. I kind of liked that look on you."

"How would you like a go at my mum's trunk?" Harry threatened.

"No thank you." Ron took a drink of pumpkin juice. "I don't think I'd look good in tights and cod piece."

"On a subject of a higher note," Hermione rolled her eyes. "Have you noticed all our classes have been about healing? Except Defense."

"Yea, even potions. I can't believe we have potions everyday." Ron groaned.

"Well, some potions you have to add something to it everyday." Hermione said. "But I still wonder about the healing theme."

"Isn't it obvious Hermione?" Harry said quietly. "The war? All the medicine and healing power available will be needed. Even students' work." Harry couldn't look directly at his friends but he saw the color leave their shocked faces. How does one deal with preparing for war? Harry wondered then a second thought followed. How can he deal with being the one to win or lose this war? A knot twisted in his stomach.

"I never thought about that." Hermione whispered. "I mean I probably did but I really didn't want to think about it." She looked like she had lost her appetite.

"Who does?" Ron patted her arm. He opened his mouth as if he was going to say something comforting but then he closed it. His worried eyes met Harry's.

Harry wondered if any of the other students had made the connection of the similar classes. "The miserable have no other medicine but only hope." Harry coughed. "Must have been a leftover."

Hermione and Ron looked at him and sighed. "Maybe, but I even I understand that one and I think you're right." Ron nodded. "So what are you going to do this afternoon Harry? While we're in potions."

"Probably finish the transfigurations and charms homework." Harry thought. "Oh, and fill out the paper work to become animagus. How was potions yesterday?"

"Wonderful," Ron snorted. "Snape and Malfoy kept making snide remarks about you not being there. I flicked a bat eye at Malfoy. Hit him right on the nose. Slimy git."

After Ron and Hermione went off to Potions, Harry went up to Gryffindor tower to finish his homework. He finished Charms and moved on to Transfiguration. As Harry read the assigned chapters, he had a strange feeling he had read them before. But that was impossible; this was a new textbook. In a short time he completed the reading to begin writing the two roll essay. Normally Harry struggled to fill one roll of parchment but as he continued his thoughts on conjuring he was shocked to find he had three rolls of parchment finished. He set it aside to let the ink dry.

Looking into his book bag Harry found the animagus forms. Carefully he filled in the normal things, name and birth date and background information. One section asked for the applicant to explain their desire to become an animagus. Harry found this extremely hard. How could he say, Oh, my dad and godfather were unregistered animagi but I wanted to do it by the book. So with an imagination learned from his divination homework Harry came up with a plausible story to write down.

Signing the bottom of the document, Harry froze. If under seventeen, form must be co-signed by parent or guardian. He tossed down his quill. Just great, he glared at the form. How was he going to get these signed? Dumbledore had said he was Harry's guardian in the wizarding world. Would he sign it? He sat staring at the offending parchment, then an idea popped into his mind. Taking a fresh sheet of parchment Harry wrote a letter to the Dursleys he hoped he wouldn't have to send.

“Harry?” Ginny was breathless as she entered the common room. “Have you seen anything of Hedwig yet?”

“No, Sorry Ginny.” Harry looked up from the letter he had just put in his book bag. Ginny sighed in frustration. “Don’t worry she’ll bring Cleo.”

“I’m just worried Cleo is so scared she won’t come out.” Ginny said, sitting down across from Harry.

The portrait opened and Ron and Hermione scrambled into the common room. “Snape is such a git.” Ron growled and threw down his bag. “Second day and I have detention.”

“What happened?” Harry asked turning to Hermione. She avoided his eyes and her cheeks went pink. Ron ears went red. “What?” Harry looked from one to another.

“Snape kept referring to me as,” Hermione blushed. “Ron’s girl friend.”

“And that’s bad because?” Harry grinned at the pair blushing even redder.

“Just the way he said it.” Growling Ron plopping down in a chair. “Made it sound, dirty or something.”

“Probably jealous.” Ginny smirked. “Most likely the prat never had a girl friend, or any friend for that matter in his whole life.” They all laughed.

“Hey, Ron, I started making up some practice drills. See what you think of them and give me any ideas of improvement if you could.” Harry dug through his bag and handed Ron several sheets of parchment.

“Sure no problem.” Ron looked over a couple of the exercises. Ginny held out her hand and he passed them over to her as he finished. They sat in silence as they studied the plans.

“Well?” Harry was getting nervous when they hadn’t said anything for such a long time.

Ginny smiled. “They are really good Harry, it’s just...” She looked to Ron who avoided Harry’s gaze. “If we were pros, but I don’t think students can do half this stuff. I know I can’t. Not even with my new broom.”

“Too professional?” Harry took the sheets back looking downcast.

“A bit.” Ron agreed. “Look Harry, I have detention tonight with Snape but tomorrow I’ll help you draw up some feasible practice drills okay?” He offered.

“I would appreciate that.” Harry grinned at Ron and Ginny to show he had no hard feelings about their honesty. “Ah well, back to the drawing board.” He crumpled the pages and chucked the papers into the fire. “I’ve got Occlumency tonight anyway. I don’t know how long that will take.”

“Are you still angry with Dumbledore?” Ginny asked bravely.

“He’s not on my list of favorite people, if you really have to know.” Harry said and saw the glance fly between Ron and Hermione. They wouldn’t have dared asked him about Dumbledore but Ginny had the nerve. He managed to keep from smiling at her boldness. “Let’s go down to dinner.” He motioned for the girls to go ahead.

At seven o’clock Harry arrived at the transfiguration classroom. He wasn’t looking forward to a confrontation with Dumbledore. He knocked on the door then entered closing the door behind him.

“Good evening, Harry.” Dumbledore said. He was seated at the teacher’s desk and indicated for Harry to take the seat in front of him.

“Headmaster.” Harry nodded as he sat down. They eyed one another for a long minute.

“You aren’t going to participate.” Dumbledore said staring hard at Harry.

“No Headmaster.” Harry said quietly. “I won’t.” For another full minute they stared with unflinching gazes.

“I’ve been informed by Professor McGonagall you are applying to become an animagus?” Dumbledore stated. “Since you are not yet of age, you will need a signature of consent from a guardian.”

“Yes, Headmaster.” Harry said calmly. His heart was beating fast. He had already anticipated the old wizard’s train of thought.

“If you agree to participate with me in learning Occlumency, Harry, I will sign the application.” Dumbledore seemed quite pleased with his arrangement.

“No thanks, Headmaster. I have written a letter to my Uncle for permission.” Harry saw from the startled look on Dumbledore’s face, that the wizard had not expected this answer.

“You think your uncle will give you permission?” Dumbledore asked carefully.

“Oh, The way I have the letter worded I think he’ll wish he had a faster owl to return it.” Harry felt a great satisfaction at the confused look on Dumbledore’s face.

“What do you mean?” Dumbledore frowned.

“I just explained to him next summer I will be of age. That I will be able to do magic.” Harry noticed the growing alarm in the old wizard.

“You would threaten him?” Dumbledore asked incredulously. He leaned forward to stare even harder at Harry.

Harry shrugged. “Threats have worked for them for years should work for me. Don’t you think?”

"You would use magic against a defenseless non-magical being?"
Dumbledore questioned then sat back as fire blazed in Harry's eyes.

With his teeth clenched, Harry spoke quietly, obviously controlling the rage within him. "Strange, you didn't seem as concerned about leaving a defenseless baby with them." He snorted. "But I suppose you don't see the comparison?"

Dumbledore leaned back in the chair and rubbed his eyes behind the half moon spectacles. "How many times will we have to go through this Harry?"

"How is Mrs. Weasley?" Harry suddenly asked.

"She is fine. I take it you are through talking about what's bothering you?" Dumbledore asked.

"What's bothering me?" Harry's voice rose then with effort he restrained himself. "Yes, I don't want to bore you since you seem to find the subject tedious and repetitive." Harry came back. "Did you capture anyone?"

"No. Since we are talking about the attack. Remus told me about this sensation you had. Would you tell me about it?" Dumbledore asked sighing. Harry told the headmaster about all he had heard and felt when approaching the ministry cars. The old wizard nodded his head. "Lily used to have those feelings too. Those feelings saved her and James once from Voldemort."

"I wouldn't have known anything about that if I hadn't read it in her letter to me." Harry began to feel angry again.

"Lily wrote a letter to you?" Dumbledore asked kindly. "Remus told me about the letters and pictures. And of course the trunk." He smiled.

"Does Lupin tell you everything I say to him?" Harry asked, suspiciously eyeing Dumbledore.

“Remus is not my spy on you Harry. He tells me things he thinks I should know. If you asked him not to tell me something, I am sure he wouldn’t.” Dumbledore assured him.

“Yeah, okay.” Harry said. “I asked him to check something out for me, about the prophecy. Did he tell you that?” Harry watched the headmaster closely.

“Not directly. But Remus asked enough questions that I figured it out on my own. I can do that sometimes.” Dumbledore said dryly.

“So I might as well ask you directly. What use could Voldemort do with full knowledge of the prophecy?” Harry asked. “The only thing I could think of had to do with the ‘power the dark lord knows not’. But I don’t see how that would help him. Unless he could get the power.”

“Or find a way to counter that power.” Dumbledore suggested. “Unfortunately, Voldemort has a knowledge of the dark arts far superior to anyone I have ever known. He could find other things we have not even considered.”

Harry nodded thinking hard. “How could he block the pain in my scar? Occlumency?”

“Perhaps.” Dumbledore considered. “Or that’s where it started. There are other skills involved no doubt.”

“He couldn’t do it forever though. When he quit trying the pain came back, hard.” Harry couldn’t help but rub his forehead with the memory. “He really thought he would kill me then. He was so angry when I told him muggle intuition had warned me.”

“Harry, these contacts, they have to stop. They’ll be the end of you if you continue.” Dumbledore was almost pleading with him.

“I have to talk to him. I have to...” Harry suddenly felt tired.

“Why, Harry? Why do you have to talk to Voldemort?” Dumbledore asked concerned.

“It’s important to find out.” Harry said haltingly, staring at the desk still rubbing his scar. “Things.”

“Things?” Dumbledore repeated, leaning forward. “What things?”

“Things I don’t know. Things I need to know.” Harry glanced up at Dumbledore feeling older than the headmaster.

Dumbledore returned the gaze and nodded. “If you will leave your application with Professor McGonagall, I will sign it and send it to the Ministry. No strings attached.” Harry looked at him a bit startled as if he had forgot himself and spoken his thought aloud.

“Thanks. What about Hogsmead permission slip?” Harry asked quietly.

“That too.” Dumbledore nodded and smiled. “I think our hour is up. I’ll see you Thursday. Goodnight, Harry.”

“Headmaster.” Harry nodded at him and left the transfiguration classroom and slowly walked back to Gryffindor tower.

Chapter 18

Much to Ginny's distress Hedwig did not show up the next couple of days. It was Friday before the white owl was spotted with the morning post.

"Finally!" Ginny said but her smile vanished when she realized Hedwig only carried a letter to Harry.

"Thanks Hedwig." Harry offered her some bacon and opened the letter. He read it out loud.

Dear Harry, Ron, Ginny and Hermione,

Ginny we're sorry Cleo is not with Hedwig. The little pip keeps avoiding all capture. She seems to know when a wand is out. No, Ginny, we are not trying to stun her but cast a sleeping spell on her.

Harry, I didn't know how long you would want Hedwig to wait so I thought I'd let you decide if you want to send her back.

Let me know what you want to do about this cat.

Love you all very much.

Molly

"Sorry Ginny." Harry handed her the letter for her to reread.

"Can Hedwig go back Harry?" Ginny asked with a pathetic look on her face.

"Sure, you don't mind do you Hedwig?" Harry petted the owl that was dipping her beak into his pumpkin juice. "It's not like I have anyone to write to anyway." He commented shrugging.

"That's not true and you know it Harry." Ginny's eyes flashed. Harry was shocked how fast her mood had changed. "Lupin would love to hear from you. He cares about you just as much as Sirius did." She stared at him as if daring him to disagree.

Harry didn't take that dare. "You're right Ginny. I think I will write to Remus tonight, after tryouts. He'll like hearing about that don't you think?" He was rewarded by a kind smile from Ginny. "And that will give Hedwig a day to rest." A brown owl interrupted their conversation. Harry took the letter from it and it flew away.

"Looks official." Ron said leaning over to look at the seal on the envelope. "It's from the Ministry of Magic." He said.

Harry quickly broke the seal and took out the letter.

"Dear Mr. Potter

This letter is to inform you that your application for becoming an animagus has been received and approved. Please follow all ministry guidelines and rules.

The ministry encourages any wizard or witch pursuing to become an animagus to find a mentor or a registered animagus to help them with the process. This is not a law but a strong suggestion.

When your animagus form is complete, you are required to register with the ministry. Please use the enclosed form when doing so.

Yours truly,

Norman Allsop

Department of Transformation

Ministry of Magic"

"Great!" Harry grinned. "I'll have to ask McGonagall when she has time to help me. Can't tonight though, Quidditch tryouts." He said.

"I wonder what you'll be Harry." Hermione stared at him as if trying to see some animal in him.

"I hope something useful." Harry considered.

"Nothing with more than four legs." Ron told him seriously. "Because if I see something with more I'll smack it."

"I'll remember that." Harry laughed as he put the letter in his bag. Harry, Ron and Hermione said goodbye to Ginny left for their first class.

In Transfiguration Harry continued to surpass the rest of the class in conjuring. While the others still struggled to conjure things no bigger than teacup, Harry had advanced to chairs and bedsteads. Although pleased with his progress, Professor McGonagall seemed almost anxious about his sudden expertise.

"Excellent Potter. I've never seen a student, even your father, conjure with such ease." McGonagall was studying the Windsor chair Harry had just produced.

"I know this sounds strange, Professor, but it's like I already know how to do it." Harry told her. "Like when I first flew on a broomstick. I just knew how."

"Interesting." McGonagall gazed at him thoughtfully. "If you had been exceptional in transfiguration before I wouldn't be so surprised but let's face it Potter, you barely scraped an exceeds expectations OWL. So this is just astounding."

After class Harry asked the professor about helping with his animagus transformation. "Yes, Potter, let me see." She looked over her appointment book. "How about Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Before dinner, you have the afternoons free since you aren't taking potions." McGonagall's eyebrow rose slightly as she said this but she didn't ask why he had dropped the class.

"That would be great, thanks Professor." Harry couldn't wait. "Is there anything I can do to prepare for it in the mean time?"

She smiled at his enthusiasm. "If you are still practicing Occlumency before you go to sleep," She received a sober nod from Harry, but McGonagall gave no hint of a position on his anger with the headmaster. "When you clear your mind, try to feel the animal within you. If you do this, by Tuesday when we meet for the first time, you may be able to see what form you will take."

"Okay, Thanks again Professor." Harry hurried out to catch up with Ron and Hermione.

The day passed exceedingly slow for Harry. As much as he liked Malahide's class, and it seemed like he was one of the few students that did, he was anxious about the quidditch team tryouts and was trying to hurry through the target practice the professor had set up for the class. To everyone's surprise Neville managed to hit all his targets and four of the ten hard to see bonus objects, making him the best of all the students and earning him a rare "Good Job" from Malahide.

"Do you think having a wand all his own helps Neville?" Harry asked Ron and Hermione as they headed to dinner.

"It sure seems like it does." Hermione said. "They say his father was a great Auror. It would be hard having to live up to that image, using the same wand that was so powerful in your father's hand."

"I know I have better control with my wand than I did with Charlie's old wand." Ron said. "Before it was broken." He added hearing a snort from Harry.

Quidditch tryouts went better than Harry expected but not as good as he had been hoping. His plan was to fill the empty keeper spots and make up a whole reserve team just in case of injuries. But only Ginny, Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan tried out for the position of chaser along with fifth year Colin Creevey. To Harry's surprise Colin turned out to be the best of the ones trying out for chaser. Ginny and Colin worked very well together. Dean and Seamus were harder to choose between. Seamus flew much better but Dean could catch and throw the quaffle with greater accuracy.

After a quick conference with Ron, Harry asked Seamus if he would try out for beater and be a reserve chaser. Andrew Kirk and Jack Sloper had improved with Angelina Johnson's training last year but Harry wanted to get a few reserve players in case of injuries.

There was a lot of noise in the Gryffindor common room that night as the new players were welcomed on to the team. Before he went to the dormitory, Harry remembered his promise and wrote a letter to Remus. Harry was very tired by the time he crawled into bed that night. He almost forgot to practice occlumency. As he cleared his mind of all thoughts and emotions, Harry tried to feel an animal inside him as McGonagall had told him. If any creature lived there, it wasn't making itself known to him tonight.

Harry woke to bright sunlight shining into the dorm. Saturday morning, he thought, rolling over to go back to sleep. It had been a rare night of dreamless sleep.

"Aren't you awake yet?" Ron's voice came from the doorway. "It's almost noon."

Harry yawned and stretched. Now that he was waking up he realized was very hungry, having missed breakfast. "I'm up." After long lunch, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny walked across the grounds to visit Hagrid.

The black beetle eyes glinted as Harry told Hagrid about their first week back. Hagrid filled the four in on Grawp's progress, insisting the small giant was almost ready to meet people again.

The four let that subject drop for fear he would drag them off into the forest to introduce them again to his half-brother. So they sat in silence for a moment sipping the tea Hagrid had made for them. Ginny launched into telling Hagrid about the Harry's trunk and the different transformation of the people trying to open it.

"Ah, your mum did know how to place a charm." Hagrid chuckled.

"I keep thinking of her, since I got the trunk and all the letters." Harry said thoughtfully. "What was she like? I mean after Hogwarts. After

she married my dad and had me?" Harry saw the startled looks on Ron and Hermione's faces. Ginny looked interested.

"Lily? Ah Harry she was a fine person." Hagrid smiled sadly. "She loved your dad, even if they did fuss a lot at each other."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked concerned. "What did they fight about?"

"Oh you know how some married folk are, always bickering about some little thing." Hagrid said. "Don't think anything of that. They settled right down once you were born. Two doting parents, just as they should be."

"But what was she like?" Harry asked studying Hagrid closely.

"Well, it's hard to describe a person. Ain't it?" Hagrid said considering, then remembered something. "She could sing. Beautiful voice she had there. When she sang you a song, it made me wish I was being rocked by her."

"Who were her friends at Hogwarts?" Ginny asked. Harry gave her a startled look. He had forgotten the others were there.

"Oh well," Hagrid suddenly found his teacup interesting. "Not too many left from that class. Specially Gryffindors." He glanced up to see the four staring at him. "I would have to say she hung around Lupin the most, both Prefects and all. Then when her and your dad got together, Sirius and James often left those two behind to go do some prank they'd schemed up."

Harry nodded wondering why Lupin never said anything. But maybe he did, Harry thought. A memory of Remus after he tried to open the trunk came back to Harry. 'Just a charm from an old friend.'

"Being muggle born. That's what the biggest fuss was about." Hagrid suddenly answered one of the questions Harry had asked. "Oh I don't mean all the pureblood rubbish the Slytherins go on about." Hagrid concentrated on his memory. "She still liked muggle stuff and James had little patience for it. I remember her telling me

once. Even though she had been a witch for years, she still thought like a muggle. And she didn't see any need to give it all up. Annoyed James a lot when she bought one of those moving cameras."

Hermione and Harry looked at each other trying to figure out what Hagrid had meant. "Oh you mean a movie camera. A video recorder." Hermione finally said.

"Whatever it was James thought it was muggle rubbish." Hagrid nodded. "But he never got the better of a real row with Lily. She'd win hands down every time." He chuckled. "I almost think he yanked her chain just to see those big green eyes flash. And to make up afterwards."

When the four finally left Hagrid's cabin to go to dinner, Harry was very quiet. "Are you all right Harry?" Hermione took his arm and leaned against him as they walked into the wind.

"I'm fine Hermione." Harry patted her hand hooked around his arm. "I didn't mean to bring everyone down. Talking about my parents."

"You didn't." Ginny took his other arm and gave him a smile. "You have every right to talk about them. We wonder about them too."

Ron took Hermione's arm and threaded his fingers through hers. "Yeah, perfectly natural." He grinned but Harry noticed a tension in his voice that stayed all through dinner and didn't leave even when Harry mentioned having another go at his mother's trunk.

"Good luck mate." Ron said stoutly.

"Hey, didn't you say you'd stand by me facing you-know-who?" Harry chided as they scrambled through the portrait hole.

"Well, yeah. Call me when he shows up." Ron plopped down on a chair in the common room.

"I'll help you Harry." Hermione glared at Ron.

“Me too.” Ginny piped up and followed Harry and Hermione up to the boys’ dormitory.

Feeling like this would be the time the trunk opened Harry quickly placed it on his bed. He drew out his wand and said. “Hear no evil, See no evil and speak no evil.” Then he tapped the lid three times. The trunk shuddered and began to hiss but no mist emerged this time.”

“Wow, did you hear that? What does that mean?” Harry said excitedly turning to Hermione and Ginny. His face fell.

“All we heard was hissing.” Hermione said with wide eyes. “What did you hear?”

Harry swallowed hard. “I heard my mom’s voice. She said a rhyme.”

“One to unlock might

With blood in sight

On Moony’s night

The words said right

And a summoned light.”

“Was that parseltongue? I didn’t recognize it.” Ginny asked then added. “Moony’s night has to be full moon.”

“Why, or how could my mom say anything in parseltongue?” Harry asked staring at the trunk.

“I think your answers lie within.” Hermione nodded to the trunk. “Ginny’s right though. You must have to open it at full moon.”

“What about the rest of it? The blood part?” Harry didn’t like the sound any of this. It made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle with uneasiness. This was dark magic if he had ever felt it.

"I don't know." Hermione frowned too. "The words could be the words you just said, but you need these other things too for the trunk to open."

"A summoned light?" Ginny wondered. "Summoned from where?"

"Well, at least I do seem to be on the right track. When's the next full moon?" Harry asked.

"I'm not sure." Hermione glanced out the dark window. "Strange she would put such a charm on it."

Harry sighed and stared at the trunk. What was so important his mother needed to guard it so closely? The two girls bid him goodnight and headed down the spiral staircase. Harry put the small chest back inside his trunk and pulled off his robes. He put on pajamas and climbed into bed. Calming his thinking, Harry pushed all thought from his mind and went in search of an animal within him.

At breakfast Ron still seemed distant but when Harry told him about the trunk his interest perked up. "Well, you have the full moon, the words and the light, but what about the blood? That's strange."

"What light? Summoned from where?" Harry questioned. "I have no clue about that."

"Harry," Ron laughed pulling out his wand. "Lumos! A summoned light."

"How simple, yet ingenious. That's really smart thinking Ron." Hermione gave him an admiring smile. This improved Ron's mood for the rest of the day. Which made Harry very glad. Ron, Ginny and Harry took Dean Thomas out to the quidditch pitch to help improve his flying ability. The four practiced the rest of the afternoon.

In the common room that night Ron spent his time muttering over his homework. Hermione informed Harry the next full moon would be September the twenty-seventh. "That's a Friday." Hermione said, looking up from her writing. She had given up knitting elf hats this

year. But she had started sending out leaflets to all pureblood names she could find in the library. In this way Hermione hoped to enlighten the ones most likely to own house elves and to show them the error of their ways.

The days leading up to the first full moon went amazingly fast for Harry. Without taking potions Harry felt more relaxed and focused than he had last year. Not having Snape's snide remarks and unfair treatment to deal with was a relief. Harry felt his animagus training could have gone better but McGonagall assured him soon he would see what animal he would become. One of the few things making him anxious was a slight increase of pain in his scar. Voldemort had blocked any attempt to enter into his mind but neither had the dark wizard tried to communicate with Harry in anyway.

Friday morning the post owls flew in and Ginny let out a cry. Harry looked up and saw Hedwig diving quickly toward Ginny. She put out her hands and a furry ball dropped into them. Hedwig flew onto Harry's shoulder and clicked her beak in irritation and scolding.

"Cleo! Oh thank you Hedwig." Ginny clutched the kitten closely then held her up to check her over. "But why didn't they put her in a box or something?"

Before anyone could answer a second owl crash landed on the table in a lump of gray feathers. "Errol!" Ron tugged a letter from the old owl and offered him some pumpkin juice. "It's for you Harry." He handed it to Harry.

Harry ripped the envelope open. "It's from Remus." He scanned it and laughed. "Listened to this."

"Harry,

A quick note to this letter I was writing to you. I think Hedwig was getting tired of Cleo's antics and took matters into her own hands...or claws. In the middle of the night we all hear this horrible racket downstairs. Sets the portrait off and wakes up the whole house. Hedwig had Cleo by the nape of the neck as gentle as a mother cat.

She was trying to find a way out of the house. So Molly opened a window and off she went. Let us know if Cleo is all right.

Remus”

“Good going Hedwig.” Harry stroked the owl on his shoulder.

Ginny offered Hedwig some sausages. “Thanks so much Hedwig. You’re the best owl in the whole world.” Hedwig ruffled her feathers importantly and began preening her wing.

“You’ll give her a big head if you keep that up.” Harry laughed. Hedwig nibbled his ear and took off. Harry unfolded a second page to read the letter Remus had sent.

“Dear Harry,

I was tickled to hear from you. It means a lot to me. More than I can ever tell you.

Sounds like you have a strong team gathered. Maybe I could get up that way to see a couple of games sometime this year.

I am not surprise that you want to be an animagus. James and Sirius would be thrilled. I’m glad you went to Professor McGonagall to help you. It is strange about your conjuring ability. But I guess one shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, so they say.

There isn’t a lot I can tell you about what’s going on here. So I better roll this and find an owl to send it. I don’t think Errol is up for a trip to Hogwarts.

Write when you can,

Remus”

Short but sweet. Harry thought. He was doubly glad he had listened to Ginny and written to Remus.

When the day finally was over and Harry waited for the common room to clear out then he brought the small chest down so not to disturb the others in trying to sleep. Ron, Hermione and Ginny sat around him in the dying light of the fireplace. The full moon shone in through the window making it almost as bright as daylight. Swallowing hard, Harry took a deep breath.

"Hear no evil, See no evil and speak no evil. Lumos!" Harry tapped the trunk with his lit wand. It shuddered and glowed then hissed loudly but did not open.

"Was that the same rhyme?" Hermione asked Harry as he slumped in disappointment.

"Yeah. What am I missing?" He frowned thinking.

"Has to be something about the blood." Ron said.

"One to unlock might with blood in sight." Ginny repeated. "I can't believe she would want blood to unlock this." Everyone looked at Ginny in surprise. "I mean I know we didn't know her but your mom didn't sound like someone who would expect real blood. It has to mean something else."

"I think Ginny is right." Hermione nodded.

"What about her blood! You have to be related to her." Ron suggested.

"But I am related to her so that couldn't be the problem." Harry said. "Which means there still a piece of this puzzle missing."

"The words said right. What if you have to say the words in parseltongue?" Ginny proposed.

Frowning Harry turned to the box. "I could try. It would help if I had a snake to hiss to." He concentrated on the loopy decorations on the trunk strapping, trying to make believe they were snakes. The words came from his mouth in a hissing stutter. He tapped the chest again

with his lit wand. Again a glow enveloped the trunk with a shudder and a hiss but still it was locked.

They all sighed in frustration. Harry rubbed his forehead. His scar had prickled each time he spoke parseltongue. "I guess we're going to have to think on it some more. When is the next full moon?"

"I looked that up when I checked on this one, just in case. October twenty-six." Hermione told him. "First Hogsmead weekend."

Cleo became the scourge of Gryffindor tower. No foot was safe with the little black and white terror loose. Two third year girls took a tumble down the stairs because of Cleo's attacks. Or she would wait in ambush and leap onto swinging robes at just the right moment to pull the wearer off balance. If Harry heard a yell of "Ginny!" He knew it was safe to proceed because someone else was dealing with the kitten.

The Wednesday before the first Hogsmead weekend Harry and Ron were changing after their quidditch practice. Harry thought the practice had gone well and talked to Ron about their chances in the first match against Slytherins the week after Hogsmead. When Ron didn't respond Harry looked over at his friend wondering what he had done.

"What's up?" Harry asked pulling on a sweatshirt.

"Uh?" Ron looked up from lacing up his left shoe. "Uh, nothing."

"Come on out with it. Have I done something?" Harry stopped doing anything and focused his whole attention on Ron.

"No." Ron said hurriedly. Harry noticed his ears getting pink. "You going to Hogsmead Saturday?"

"Well, yeah. Why?" Harry couldn't think of what was making Ron so nervous around him.

“Well, I.” Ron fiddled with his other shoe. “Nothing. Forget it.” He hurriedly tied his shoe and threw on his cloak. Harry stopped him from leaving.

“Ron, we’re friends, spit it out will ya?” Harry said firmly sitting down beside him.

For a long moment Ron just sat there then he let out a breath and looked up at Harry with a worried face. “Okay, I want to go to Hogsmead with Hermione. Just Hermione.” His ears got redder but he continued to meet Harry’s gaze.

“Oh.” Harry blinked. He hadn’t seen this coming.

“Harry, it’s not that I don’t want your company or anything. It’s just, Hermione and I got really close when you were sick.” Ron said. “But it’s been so different when the three of us are together.” He stumbled trying to explain.

“Crowding your style a bit am I?” Harry grinned. Relief flooded on to Ron’s face.

“I’d just like some time with her that isn’t school.” Ron said. “We could meet later in the Three Broomsticks.” He added.

“Understandable. Okay Ron. I’ll make up some excuse to leave later for Hogsmead, on one condition.” He paused. “You have to kiss her.” Harry grinned at the look of utter horror mixed with possibilities in Ron’s eyes. He wondered if Ron was going to breath any time soon.

“Harry,” Ron finally squeaked. “I’ve never really kissed a girl. I mean, well, Angelina kissed me last year but I’m pretty sure it’s not the same.”

“Well, at least your first kiss isn’t likely to end with Hermione crying all over you.” Harry nudged Ron.

“I sure hope not.” Ron laughed. He fiddled with fastening his cloak. “Thanks Harry for understanding. I didn’t know how you felt about

Hermione. She's always quick to hug you and take your arm. I wondered if there was something going on that I didn't know."

"We're best friends, like you and me." Harry said. "I hope things work out between you two. That would really be great."

Ron smiled and flushed. "Thanks. I hope so too." They splashed their way back to the castle. Harry made himself scarce so Ron could ask Hermione. When the redhead came up to bed Harry saw a huge grin on his face.

Settling back on his pillows Harry grinned at the thought of Ron and Hermione. They were always fussing at each other. Figures they would end up together. He let out a breath and began his search for his animal self. A month of animagus coaching had not produced any results yet. As he slipped into a dream Harry felt a cool breeze through his hair.

Chapter 19

"Don't get discouraged Potter." Professor McGonagall patted his shoulder. "Sometimes it take longer to see the appearance you'll take."

"Since I have been so good at conjuring I guess I've been expecting this to go faster." Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. It was Thursday afternoon and he was in the transfiguration classroom trying to find his animagus form.

"Conjuring has very little to do with changing into an animagus, so that expectation was misplaced." McGonagall said. "We'll have to continue this next Tuesday. I have another class."

"Thanks for your help Professor." Harry grabbed us his book bag and left the classroom. He was disappointed he hadn't found out what animal he would become. Harry began to worry that there wasn't an animal in him.

Occlumency that night was quiet, mainly because neither him nor Dumbledore spoke much. They spent most of hour meeting each other's eyes briefly or speaking shortly of unimportant things. Harry often wondered what was going through the old wizard's mind when they sat in silence. Many times a worried or almost scared look crossed Dumbledore's face but the headmaster never spoke of his concerns. Actually Harry had expected Dumbledore to give up these meetings as a lost cause but he hadn't. Evidently he wanted to maintain some sort of connection with Harry, even if less than amiable.

Saturday morning, Harry felt strange seeing Ron and Hermione go off to Hogsmeade without him. Harry had told Hermione, he wanted to practice his animagus with McGonagall and that she had a free morning. Harry assured her, he would see them at the Three Broomsticks later.

"Potter why aren't you in Hogsmeade?" Professor McGonagall asked suspiciously.

"I thought I'd practice with my animagus while the castle was quiet. I'm going later." Harry thought if the story worked for Hermione it would work on the professor.

"Yes, that is a excellent idea. Especially good to try in the morning when you are well rested. I was going to grade some papers. You may practice in the room while I work." McGonagall offered.

"Ah, sure, thanks." Harry nodded. Why not? He had to give Ron and Hermione some lead time before he went to Hogsmeade. And at least it would be pursuing something he wanted to do.

An hour had passed and Harry felt frustrated nothing seemed to be happening at all. "I don't think I can do this." He finally said.

"Nonsense. I have no doubt you can do it." McGonagall assured him looking up from her papers.

"But I've tried and I can't find a hint of an animal within me." Harry sighed.

"Maybe that is your problem." The professor considered thoughtfully. "Don't try to find it. Just let it out."

Harry stared at her. Let it out? A flash of a cage and opening the door entered his mind. There was a warm feeling in his chest. Closing his eyes Harry concentrated on releasing the creature inside of him. For a brief instance Harry felt his wings lift then he was back staring at McGonagall. "A bird! I'm going to be a bird of some sort!" Harry shouted then laughed.

"Excellent. Well, done Harry." McGonagall smiled at him. She seemed as excited as he was. "Try again. See if you can hold the thought longer."

"Will I know how to fly or will I have to learn?" Harry asked excitedly. "You know. I've dreamed of flying. I just now remembered. Several times matter of fact."

“Ah, a very good indication you are on the right track.” McGonagall told him. “You will know what a normal bird would know. But you will need to learn the finer nuances of the creature but most of the time you can do what the animal can do.”

Taking a deep breath Harry focused on releasing his bird self. Warmth spread through him and then Harry was looking up at the professor’s shocked face. Unfolding his large wings Harry turned his long neck and looked at the scarlet feathers stretched out on either side of him. A phoenix! He was a Phoenix! Suddenly he was himself again. Harry panted from the exertion. “I’m a Phoenix!”

“I saw that Potter.” McGonagall still looked stunned.

“What’s wrong? I think being a Phoenix is cool.” Harry said getting a little worried by the distress in the professor’s face.

“What’s wrong? I guess nothing is wrong with being a Phoenix.” The professor said carefully. “But Harry, I have never heard of any animagus being a Phoenix. The creature is too magical. Too complex to change into or so it was thought.” McGonagall’s voice was uneasy. “You must be very careful in this.”

“Why? I don’t understand.” Harry felt his elation of finally seeing his animal form vanish with McGonagall’s seemingly needless worry.

“Since there is no precedence of such an animagus there is no way of knowing if a complete transformation is possible.” Professor McGonagall said.

“Should I try again?” Harry wasn’t going to let the prospect of being a phoenix escape him.

At first Harry thought the professor was going to say no but then she nodded. “Might as well, I don’t think I would be able to stop you.” McGonagall eyes flashed a little but the corner’s of her mouth twitched.

The transformation took only an instant this time. Harry lifted his wings and flapped. Flying! He was flying. He laughed. Harry heard

the clear piping song of a phoenix then realized he was making the noise! He glided around the classroom and saw the startled look on McGonagall's face following his flight. He came in for a landing on the back of her chair but missed and landed on the desk.

"My word Potter." McGonagall stepped back when Harry resumed his human form.

"Sorry Professor. Flying is a little tricky." Harry scrambled off the desk. "I can see I have a lot to learn." He grinned at her.

The transfiguration teacher finally relented and smiled back. "It is quite wonderful isn't it?"

"I'll say." Harry couldn't stop smiling. "Now what? Do I keep practicing? When is it official that I'm an animagus?"

"Yes, you need to practice controlling your transformation. Holding it then consciously willing yourself back to human form." McGonagall looked at him over her glasses. "You especially do not want to be flying and suddenly become human again."

"No, that wouldn't be good." Harry nodded soberly. "Will I be able to transport myself, like Fawkes does?"

"I really do not know." McGonagall thought. "But if I were to guess, I would say yes. You certainly look and sound like a true phoenix." She frowned at the grin spreading wider across Harry's face. "You will restrain from trying such a thing until you have completely mastered transforming. Is that understood?"

"Oh sure. I understand." Harry felt too elated to worry about limitations. "I think I'll head into Hogsmeade. I can't wait to tell Ron and Hermione. Thanks for your help, Professor."

"You are quite welcome Harry." McGonagall nodded. "Oh and Harry, it is a good idea not to tell everybody what you become. Anonymity does have its advantages."

A cold wind blew from the east as Harry hurried along the road to Hogsmeade. It felt strange walking this path alone. As he approached Hogsmeade Station Harry had a strange feeling he was being watched. He looked quickly around into the wooded area near the south end of the lake. Harry slowed his pace slightly and tried to walk quietly. Harry wished he had put on the silent boots he had gotten for his birthday. Listening for anything out of the ordinary, a gust of wind blew in his face again. A familiar smell of stale tobacco met his nose.

"Dung?" Harry called softly but kept walking.

"Howd ja know it was me?" A voice came from the wood. The man was obviously wearing an invisibility cloak.

"Lucky guess." Harry didn't feel like telling Mundungus he could be smelt. "Are you my tail?" He began felt angry. Dumbledore had not said anything about someone guarding him into Hogsmeade.

"I'm just follering orders lad." Dung said.

"That's okay. I know." Harry sighed. "See ya, well, talk to you later I guess." He hurried on into Hogsmeade. His first stop was Honeydukes. With a large sack of sweets Harry left the shop, looking up and down the street for signs of Ron and Hermione. Heading toward the Three Broomsticks Harry smiled slightly at a couple not very well hidden behind a tree, kissing. He had taken three paces and stopped dead in his tracks. Slowly he turned around and saw thick bushy brown hair blowing, covering the face of a tall redhead teen. Ron and Hermione! Harry blushed and grinned. He quickly moved on, not wanting to be seen by the pair. Although part of him wanted to go embarrass the two by interrupting them.

Now what? Harry thought as he wandered back towards the pub. Then he saw Ginny and Dean holding hands and laughing heading for the Shrieking Shack. He felt a twinge of jealousy but then another feeling of being watched washed over him. It wasn't the same as when he had noticed Mundungus. It was the same sensation he had experienced when they had walked up to the ministry cars. Harry looked up and down the street. It was filled with Hogwarts students

both ways. A sudden feeling of dread made him turn around quickly bumping into Neville.

“Hi Harry.” The round face boy said brightly then his face became concerned. “What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know.” Harry’s heart was beating fast. He jumped as the wind banged a shop sign. “Something’s wrong.”

“What can I do?” Neville looked into Harry’s scared face.

“I don’t know.” A great surge of panic welled in Harry. Sounds of people around him became confused and muffled with the roar and howl of the wind. Then a scream pierced above all the noise. Harry gasped and whirled in the direction. “Ginny!”

“What?” Neville looked in the same direction. “What is it?”

Harry took a couple of running steps then turned. “Get Ron and Hermione. Over there.” He pointed in the direction of the tree he had seen them under.” Then Harry ran on toward the Shrieking Shack. Drawing his wand, he sprinted up the path then saw a figure on the ground. Dean Thomas, stunned. Harry heard a shout ahead of him and ran on. Near the shack he saw outlines of three people.

“Stupefy.” Two black-hooded figures had stunned the smaller form, which crumpled to the ground.

“Stupefy, Stupefy” Harry spells hit dead on and the dark shapes fell beside the red-haired girl. Harry ran up to her. “Ginny.” He tried to pick her up but he knew from experience he wouldn’t get very far carrying her like that.

“Morilicorpus.” Harry raised Ginny’s limp form. Two loud cracks sounded from the other side of the shrieking shack. Then two more cracks resounded from the path. Death Eaters! Were they attacking the village? Grabbing Ginny by the arm and keeping his wand on her to keep her levitated Harry pulled her into the trees by the Shrieking Shack. Jets of red light flew around them as the newcomers shot stunning spells at them.

Harry shot spells back at them; a yelp told him he had connected at least once. With difficulty Harry pulled Ginny through the trees. But he knew they wouldn't be able to hide from Death Eaters pursuing them much longer. Suddenly Harry fell heavily to the ground. He looked to see what had tripped him. Two feet? Two grungy booted feet were lying in the forest. Then the scent of tobacco wafted up, Harry groped around and pulled an invisibility cloak off a stunned Mundungus Fletcher.

"Sorry Dung. I think I need this more than you do, right now." Harry took the cloak and grasped onto Ginny again then made a jagged path through the wood. Shouting could be heard getting closer. More flashes of red streaked around them. Harry knew the death Eaters were just shooting at random in hope of hitting them by accident.

A crack sounded in front of him. "Stupefy." Harry shouted and the figure crumpled. Shoot first and ask questions later. Malahide had drilled that into their brains. A place to hide is what they needed. He glanced around. Trees were thicker behind them but larger in front. One of the bigger trees had fallen and smaller trees had grown in a light thicket around it. That's what he had been looking for. Harry had never raised anything so heavy but this was the time for it. He thought.

"Windgardium Leviosa." The huge tree lifted from its resting place. Harry quickly dug a shallow hollow in the soft dirt and pulled Ginny into the depression then he got in beside her and threw the invisibility cloak over them. Quietly and carefully he lowered the tree over top of them. Crunching of the twigs announced the death eaters approaching. Trying hard not to breathe loudly, Harry was sure they'd be able to hear the frantic pounding of his heart.

The crunching went past their hiding place. But two more pair of footsteps entered the little clearing. "I'm sure they came this way." Lucius Malfoy's voice sounded angry. "Look over there Goyle." Malfoy paced around where Harry and Ginny lay hidden. To Harry's horror Ginny began to stir. He clamped his hand over her mouth to keep any sound from escaping. Her eyes popped open and she gave

a slight squeak but quickly muffled it when Harry shook his head and placed a finger on his lips.

“Nobody over this way.” Goyle’s dull voice called out. “I’ll check over there.”

“You better hope you find that girl. The Dark Lord will not be happy if we don’t bring her back to him.” Lucius Malfoy’s voice now was twinged with fear. Harry heard him mutter. “Damn it.”

More footsteps came near their tree. A shudder went through Ginny as the feet came closer and stood within touch if they had reached out their hands. “They have to be here somewhere. They can’t have disappeared.”

“We’re going to have to form a line and sweep the trees.” Malfoy ordered the other Death Eaters to take positions. “We’ll stun as we go.” The horrible the sound of stupefy being shouted by several death eaters filled the air. Crimson light illuminated the area as the dark wizards moved off in a line. Again and again they heard the spell shouted slowly becoming more distant.

Over the noise Harry was finally able to draw a couple of deep breathes. Barely making any sound he whispered to Ginny to keep silent. She nodded swallowing hard. In a short time several loud cracks told them the Death Eaters had returned to the area.

“Who’s going to tell the Dark Lord she got away?” Crabbe’s fear was evident. There was dead silence. “I’m not going to. It wasn’t my fault she got away.”

“I told you to wait but you had to stun that boy and give her a warning.” Malfoy growled.

“But you were supposed to stun her.” Crabbe fired back. “And you missed.” He winced in pain. “The Dark Lord calls us.” There were two loud cracks.

Uneasy shifting of feet nearby told Ginny and Harry some of the death eaters were still near by. Harry grimaced in pain and clutched

his scar. Ginny looked on helplessly. Excruciating burning agony made Harry gasp. If this kept up he would give away their hiding place.

“Stun me.” Harry breathed and shoved his wand in her hand. “Hurry.” Their eyes met and Harry saw a scared determination in her brown eyes and she gave a slight nod.

“Stupefy.” Ginny whispered. With a jolt a wonderful mind numbing darkness over took Harry.

Something in Harry’s brain told him not to make a sound when he awoke. He opened his eyes to see Ginny staring up at the full moon high above them. She shivered against him. Harry vaguely remembered Ginny stunning him at least three times to keep him from crying out from the pain in his scar.

“Anything?” Harry whispered hoarsely. Ginny jumped but then shook her head.

“I haven’t heard anything. Not for a long time.” She whispered so softly he could barely hear. “I was afraid to move.”

“It’s probably better that you didn’t.” Harry said in her ear. “I think it’s best if we wait until someone we know comes for us. What do you think?”

“I think your right.” Ginny shivered again and Harry put his own cloak around her too and pulled her closer to warm her. She gave him a smile and laid her head on his shoulder, finding a nice niche in his arms to lie in. Harry lean his cheek against her hair and wished this whole situation was different. “Moony’s night.” Ginny said.

“Uh? OH.” Harry realized what she had meant. “There’ll be another one next month.”

Ginny cuddled closer to Harry’s chest and yawned. She didn’t see Harry’s eyes snap open with a sudden flush of warmth that had nothing to do with sharing a cloak. He swallowed hard and tried to put the thoughts from his mind.

“Does your scar still hurt?” Ginny asked quietly.

“What? Oh, yeah some.” Harry mind didn’t seem to want to focus on unimportant things, like Voldemort’s rage. Instead it seemed to be content to notice how soft Ginny was next to him. The scent of her hair touching his cheek and how wonderful she fit against him.

Through out the night Harry dozed restlessly. It seemed though he would just drop off and he would hear something that would cause him to wake again. By daybreak the pair was just contemplating leaving their hiding place when they heard footsteps again. They froze listening. Harry felt Ginny’s heart beating fast.

“Harry? Ginny?” A shout rang through the woods.

“Hagrid!” Ginny almost leaped up but Harry held her down and shook his head.

“Wait.” He pointed his wand to his throat and whispered, “Sonorus. Hagrid is that you?” Harry’s voice was magnified and no one would be able to tell where it come from.

“Harry! Is Ginny there with you? Where are you? Of course it’s me.” Hagrid’s voice seemed closer than Harry had realized.

“In my second year, who did you send Ron and me to see in the forbidden forest?” Harry’s questioned echoed through the woods.

“Aragog. I told you to follow the spiders.” Hagrid shouted.

“Quietus.” Harry had pointed his wand at his throat. “That’s him. Windgardium Leviosa.” He levitated the dead tree and they scrambled out of the hollow.

“Over here Hagrid!” Harry shouted helping Ginny to her feet. They were both stiff from being on the cold ground.

“Well you two sure’re a sight for sore eyes.” Hagrid big form stomped into view and grabbed the two up into a bone-crushing hug. “Over

here Professor Dumbledore.” Hagrid bellowed so loud Ginny clapped her hands to her ears. The headmaster appeared hurrying toward them. When he saw them alive and well, a look of utter relief washed over him.

“Thank Merlin. Are the both of you all right?” Dumbledore asked. Several other teachers appeared out of the woods.

“I’m just freezing. Did you have all the teachers looking for us?” Ginny asked crossing her arms to warm herself from the chilly wind. It had been warmer under the tree.

“Of course.” Dumbledore seemed surprised by the question. “Let’s get you two back to the castle.”

“Is Hogsmeade all right? Did you find Mundungus? I took the invisibility cloak he had.” Harry looked back toward Hogsmeade.

“Yes, Hogsmeade is fine. Mundungus is no worse for wear. As is Dean Thomas.” Dumbledore assure them. He picked up a large rock near by. “Portus.” It shimmered blue then looked quite normal. “This will take you to the hospital wing. Ready?”

Harry and Ginny touched the portkey and Dumbledore counted to three. A jerk from behind his navel and a rush of color and sound sent Harry forward. He felt Ginny bump into him as they sped forward. Then the walls of the infirmary appeared around them. He swayed but remained on his feet. He reached out and kept Ginny from falling over.

“Thanks. I guess I’m just going to have to get used to you saving me.” Ginny said ruefully. “Thanks.” She put her hands on his chest and gently kissed his cheek.

Madam Pomfrey came rushing out of her office. “At last they found you. Come here.” She bustled them off to separate beds and drew screens around them. The nurse would not have any of Harry’s insistence that he was fine and just wanted to go up to Gryffindor tower to sleep. Reluctantly he put on the pajamas she had thrust into his hands and crawled into the bed.

Madam Pomfrey came back around carrying a goblet that was smoking. "Here this will warm you up." She hurried off to Ginny, muttering about the dreadfulness of being out all night in the freezing wind. And she was certain they would catch their death of cold.

The potion worked its magic and Harry felt heat creep through his body. The bed was softer and warmer than the cold moist ground they had laid on all night. He sank back and closed his eyes.

For the first time in over a month Harry found himself in Voldemort's mind. The pain of his rage was unbearable. The Dark Lord was punishing his followers that had failed him. And even worse had let Harry Potter thwart his plans. Harry didn't want this contact he pushed himself away. He knew he wasn't strong enough to deal with Voldemort. But as he pulled back the dark wizard felt him. Voldemort roared in fury. Using all his power Voldemort forced himself into Harry's mind.

Harry felt his eyes snap open against his will. More agony than he had ever known coursed through his head. He didn't register the two people sitting beside his bed. He didn't hear them ask him what was wrong. The thing inside him forced his head to look at the people. A vehemence hiss escaped from his lips when he saw the red hair. All Harry could do was try to bear the torturous pain as Voldemort used his body to leap on to Ron and clutch his throat in his hands. Squeezing tighter and tighter on the flesh under his fingers.

Harry heard Hermione pleading with him to stop and crying for help but could do nothing. A stunning spell seemed to bounce off of him. Then a soft hand touched his gripping a struggling neck. Through the searing pain Harry could see the small hand covering his on Ron's throat.

"Let go Harry." Ginny's kind voice penetrated the pain. "Harry, let go."

Harry felt his body go limp as Voldemort fled his body. Noise and confusion exploded around him. There was no strength left in his body to move a muscle. Strong hands lifted him back into the bed.

Shaking violently as the pain subsided Harry knew what he had done. What Voldemort had made him do. Was Ron all right? He didn't have the strength to ask. He couldn't move. A potion was forced between his lips and he managed to swallow the burning liquid. A welcoming numbness crept through his body and Harry felt no more.

Author's notes:

Thanks for all the reviews!

That trunk is annoying isn't it? All the clues are there. Can anyone figure it out?

I know Harry as a phoenix animagus has been done, many times. And I almost changed it at one point but I had already put in the little flying dream hints and decided to go with my original plan. Which is usually the best.

Chapter 20

Images of Ron's dead body drifted in and out of Harry's dream. But Harry didn't want to wake up and face what could be reality. Then suddenly he sat up straight.

"Ron!" Harry looked around wildly.

"Calm down Harry," Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder and pushed Harry back down on the bed. "Ron is fine. He momentarily stepped out to use the facilities."

"I could have killed him." Harry put his face in his hands despair overwhelming him. "He must hate me. How can I face him? How can I go up to Gryffindor tower and look him in the face."

"Then how about looking me in the face now?" Ron pulled Harry's hands away from his eyes.

"Ron!" Harry grabbed his friend's arms shaking with relief. He needed to touch Ron to make sure he was real. Ron returned the grip with an understanding nod.

"I'm okay. Can't get rid of me that easily." Ron tried to lighten the mood but quickly saw Harry's nerves were too raw and he was struggling to keep tears back. "Harry, I'm okay." He said gently.

"I almost killed you." Harry clutched harder at his friend. "I could have killed you." He whispered, the tears started down his cheeks and he couldn't talk anymore. He let go of Ron and turned away from them. Harry tried to get a hold of his emotions, but he found he had no control left. Tears fell and Harry was unable to check them.

"Harry, look at me." Ron's hand was on his shoulder. Harry opened his eyes to find Ron's face right in front of him. He couldn't meet his friend's eyes. "Harry look at me." Ron repeated. Reluctantly Harry met Ron's eyes.

"I know you could never kill me." Ron said firmly. Harry felt the conviction in the words.

"Voldemort could have." Harry swallowed and wiped his eyes.

"I don't care what power you-know-who...." Ron paused still keeping eye contact. "I don't care what power Voldemort has, I know you wouldn't have let him killed me."

Hearing Voldemort's name for the first time from Ron made Harry's tears stop. "I don't know." He said uncertainly.

"Well, I do." Ron insisted gently. He sat on the edge of the bed rubbing Harry's back. "I knew you would be beating yourself up over this. That's why I wanted to be here when you woke up."

Harry stared at Ron to make sure this was really his friend. The person sitting beside him seemed so much older than he had a day ago. Maybe that's what near death experience does to a person Harry thought soberly.

"Now don't go off again." Ron warned. "I only have so much sensitivity and I gotta save some for Hermione." This was the Ron that Harry knew. He had to laugh but even in laughing tears welled up in his eyes again. He quickly wiped them away and snorted.

"Makes me wish I'd interrupted you two behind that tree." Harry grinned as Ron went pink. Then Harry remembered Dumbledore was in the room. He glanced at the Headmaster and found his eyes twinkling and he was smiling.

"If you had I think I might have strangled you." Ron growled shoving Harry's shoulder. "Oh, Thanks for saving Ginny, again." He cuffed Harry's shoulder.

"Is she okay?" Harry asked. "I can't believe Voldemort tried to kidnap her. Did the Death Eaters attack Hogsmeade?"

"Hogsmeade was not their target. Apparently their only goal was Ginny." Dumbledore said grimly. "I think they wanted to get in and out as quickly and quietly as they could but you spoiled their plan." He nodded in a satisfied way. "Neville tells me you felt something?"

"I heard Ginny scream." Harry shuddered with the memory of the disturbing feeling he had before her yell. "But I knew something was wrong. I don't know why. But I knew."

"Thanks to you mate Ginny's fine. Worried about you but she's fine otherwise." Ron grinned then he yawned loudly.

"Why don't you go get some sleep? I don't need babysat anymore." Harry told him.

"I think I'll do just that. Hermione and Ginny went to bed a couple of hours ago." Ron got up. "I'll see you in the morning. Goodnight Harry, Professor." Ron nodded to the both of them and left the hospital wing.

Harry watched him go with a slight pang. What would he do without Ron? He sighed and glanced at the headmaster still gazing at him.

"Good friends are hard to come by. You are very lucky, Harry." Dumbledore smiled. "I think now you will see the necessity of taking Occlumency lessons." As Dumbledore told Harry this, his voice became uncertain as a look of fury flashed on to Harry's face. The next instant all the windows and glass in the room shattered.

Madam Pomfrey came running out. "What happened?" She gasped at all the broken glass. "My word? Headmaster?"

"No one is hurt. I'll see to it Poppy." Dumbledore told her calmly but Harry could see the worry in his face. A wave of his wand and the windows were repaired along with many vials and flasks. Madam Pomfrey eyed Harry and Dumbledore then retreated back into her office.

"I'm sure you did not do that on purpose, Harry." Dumbledore gazed at him. "But I don't know what made you so angry."

Harry struggled to contain his rage from bursting out again. He trembled as he spoke through his clenched teeth. "I almost strangle my best friend and all you can find to talk to me about is

Occlumency?" Harry shook and pressed hard against the pillow willing himself not to lose control. "Nice tactic, to attack while my defenses are down. Malahide teach you that?"

Dumbledore sighed. "You are not an enemy for me to attack, Harry. But you are right. My timing was inappropriate." The headmaster rubbed his eyes behind his half-moon glasses. "I do apologize, Harry. I know you are tired. I'll leave you to rest now."

Harry watched the old wizard rise. For the first time he noticed Dumbledore leaned on a staff as he walked wearily from the infirmary. The headmaster did not return for the remainder of Harry's stay.

Monday evening Harry was allowed to leave the hospital wing. He dreaded facing the rest of the school. His attack on Ron must be the talk of the whole castle by now he thought. When Harry entered the common room only Hermione and Ron sat by the fireplace. Then Harry noticed they sat very close together.

"I'm not interrupting anything am I?" He grinned as he sat down close beside Hermione and Ron gave him a dirty look.

"No," Hermione blushed and was more flustered than Harry had ever seen her. "Good to see you back Harry."

"Yeah, like usually you have perfect timing?" Ron glared at him as if trying to make him move away from Hermione.

"How are you feeling?" Hermione looked closely at Harry's face.

"I'm fine." To annoy Ron he put a casual arm around Hermione's shoulder.

"Would you get your paws off my girl?" Ron took Harry's hand and pushed it off Hermione. She blushed but didn't correct him Harry noticed.

“Wing, not paw.” Harry corrected waiting for the hint to sink into their minds.

Hermione eyes flew open. “You’re a bird? Oh Harry, that’s wonderful. You found your animagus form?”

“What kind of bird? An owl?” Ron asked excitedly.

“I am a Phoenix.” Harry announced to them. Their jaws dropped open. “Watch.” He closed his eyes and concentrated. A gasp came from Ron and Hermione. Harry stretched his wings and flapped around the room and landed beside Hermione again. He blinked at them then willed his human form to emerge.

“Oh Harry,” Hermione gave him a hug. “That’s wonderful.”

“Excellent Harry.” Ron firmly took Hermione’s hand.

“McGonagall seemed worried about it. Said there’s never been a Phoenix animagus.” Harry said. “But I think it is great.” Then he yawned. “I think I’ll go up to bed. Goodnight.”

Harry climbed into bed and pulled the hanging around him. Waiting for his heart to calm, Harry thought of his phoenix form. It helped clear his mind of his emotions. Feeling a quietness wash over him, Harry felt a connection with his other form that he hadn’t considered before tonight. A bark-like laugh echoed through his mind as it drifted off to sleep. Sirius’s dog self had made itself known in his human form too.

On the edge of sleep Harry became aware of a mind pressing into his. Calmly he halted the intrusion. “What do you want?” Harry asked gritting his teeth from the pain erupting in his scar.

“Ah, so you know I’m here. A bit stronger tonight aren’t you.” Voldemort voice was controlled and his mind very guarded.

“What did you want with Ginny?” Harry questioned. Might as well get some good out of this contact he thought.

"We're old friends. Or don't you remember. I certainly do." Voldemort laughed.

"But that was after you lost your powers." How could Voldemort know what Ginny had written in that blasted book?

"Ah, but the diary held my memories. So what it remembered, I remembered." Voldemort seemed bored by the conversation.

Harry stored this information for later. It didn't make sense to him. "But what did you want with her?" He insisted his eyes watering from the pain.

"I thought she would be amusing." Voldemort sneered.

"She's not the child you remember. Ginny's a powerful witch." Harry gritted his teeth as he felt Voldemort try his mind again.

"Everyone is a child compared to me Harry Potter." Voldemort snarled.

"If you think that then you're in real trouble." Harry snorted then gasped at the pain from the dark wizard's rage. "Well if you're not going to be cordial I might as well leave." With a great effort he pulled away from Voldemort. Taking deep breaths Harry tried not to groan too loudly so he wouldn't wake up the others. In his mind a phoenix song echoed faintly, warming his body and calming his thoughts.

In the morning when Harry came down to the common room, Ginny saw him and gave a nod and mumbled something about a quick breakfast and hurried out of the portrait hole. Harry waited for until Ron and Hermione came down to the common room.

"Is Ginny all right?" He glanced at the back of the painting. "She acted sort of strange this morning."

Hermione and Ron exchanged glances. Then Hermione gave a snort of irritation. "It's been hard for her. There have been so many rumors. And she had a fight with Dean and I think they broke up."

"Rumors? What of me attacking Ron? Why would that..." Harry began to ask.

"Not about that. About you and Ginny spending a night in the wood." Ron's eyes flashed. "Together. Alone." Harry didn't need to have Ron spell it out to figure out the rest.

"HOW could they think that?" Harry fumed. "If they only knew, how it was to be targeted, to be hunted by Death Eaters." He forced himself to take a deep breath.

"Can't do much to stop the stories. People like that sort of rubbish." Ron growled. "Oh, I'll miss quidditch practice Wednesday. I have detention. I jinxed Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. Remember the slug thing I had?" He grinned evilly. "As Hagrid said, better out than in."

Harry laughed at the thought of the three Slytherins eating slugs. Climbing down the staircases to the great hall Harry grew angry over the gossip going around. 'As if Ginny didn't have enough to contend with, getting stunned and almost being kidnapped.'

The whispers and snickers in the great hall infuriated Harry as he ate breakfast, even more so because Gryffindors were among the loudest gossips. Ginny had left before he had sat down. When Lavender nudged Pavarti and giggled behind her hand for the fifth time, Harry banged his fist on the table and stood up glaring at the Gryffindors. He didn't shout but everyone in the great hall heard him.

"You listen to me. Because I'm only going to say this once." Harry frowned down a smile from Lavender. "I have never been so ashamed of Gryffindors. Ginny and I spent a horrible cold night hoping Voldemort's Death Eaters wouldn't find us. None of you have experienced anything like that. I hope it doesn't take the dark mark above your house for to you to grasp the terror of these times. And to

make you see how this petty gossip is beneath all of you.” Harry grabbed his bag and left to a totally silent great hall.

Through out the day Harry noticed students greeting him in the hall more than usual. Slytherins were still their snide selves but from Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs Harry didn’t hear a single snicker. Every Gryffindor who felt guilty made a point of speaking to Harry and apologizing.

“Is Ginny avoiding me?” Harry asked as they headed for dinner that evening. “Every time I enter a room she’s in she leaves with barely a hi.”

“Yeah, I think so.” Ron said. “Slytherins are still shooting off their mouths.”

“I better talk to her.” Harry said when he spotted her at the Gryffindor table.

“Harry, be gentle.” Hermione cautioned. “She’s really upset.”

Harry stole up beside Ginny before she knew he was there. Ginny jump when he sat down beside her with his back against the table so he could look her in the face. “Are you mad at me? Harry asked trying to catch her eyes.

“No.” Ginny shook her head and continued to pick at her food. “No.” She repeated and swallowed.

“I’m sorry you have to put up with all the rubbish.” Harry said sincerely.

Ginny looked at him startled. “You’re sorry? What do you have to be sorry about? You save my life and all you get is people making up stories.” Her eyes flashed in anger. “I’m the one who’s sorry.”

Harry leaned against the table on his elbow with his hand on his cheek. “Well, compared to the other rumors that have flown around

the school about me being a crazed lunatic, one with me spending the night in the arms of a beautiful redhead doesn't fuss me all that much." He gave her a sly smile.

Ginny's cheeks went pink then she burst out laughing. She grabbed him around the neck for a hug. "You are something special Harry Potter."

"Ginny you're just going to add to those stories hugging me in public like this." Harry warned returning her hug glad she was happy again.

"Quit pawing my sister Potter." Ron nudged him laughing.

"Shut it Weasley." Harry and Ginny broke apart and he turned around in his seat to face the table. "Or I'll see that you are never alone." He saw the horror on Ron's face and laughed. Hermione caught Harry's gaze and she beamed at him. She must have approved of his handling of the situation.

Seven o'clock arrived and Harry found himself standing outside of the transfiguration classroom. His mouth was dry and just thinking of opening that door and facing Dumbledore made him want to disappear. His head ached; he rubbed his forehead with his left hand and resignedly opened the door with his right.

"Good evening Harry." Dumbledore sat against the desk wearing deep blue robes trimmed with gold.

"Headmaster." Harry nodded and sat down in front of him then waited. It was Dumbledore's move.

"Harry," Dumbledore's face looked stern and almost angry when he had arrived for his occlumency lesson. "After the events of the Sunday night, I'm sure you will agree with me about your need learning occlumency. Shall we begin?"

"I told you, I won't try." Harry said without emotion.

"Up until now, I have been very tolerant of this," Dumbledore sighed in frustration. "Of this disobedience of yours. However, you are jeopardizing other people's lives now. And I am headmaster of this school and you will obey me in this." The old man's eyes bore into Harry's.

"You can't force me to do anything." Harry's jaw was set and he glared at the old face.

"No," Dumbledore did not back down. "I can't force you but I can withhold privileges." The headmaster took a deep breath. "I'm afraid Harry, until you agree to participate in learning occlumency, I will have to ban you from quidditch."

It felt like Dumbledore had shouted stupefy at him. Harry sat staring at him growing angrier. Then in a calm smoldering voice, Harry managed. "Fine do what you have to do." He saw a startled look in the old face as Harry stared off in another direction.

"You would give up quidditch, to continue this war on me?" Dumbledore asked frowning. "You would endanger your friends to punish me for something I still don't understand why or what for?" He looked angrier than Harry now. "I thought you were made of better stuff than selfishness, Harry."

"Why would you think that?" Harry raged turning on him. "Growing up with the Dursleys I learned all about selfishness. It seems to work for them quite well." He was breathing hard but no harder than Dumbledore.

"I have told you why had to live with them." Dumbledore's temper was still in his voice. "You needed the protection..."

"Of my mother's blood. Yeah I heard that too. But who protected me from the Dursleys?" Harry interrupted in a snarl.

"I know you had a difficult time of it." Dumbledore said slightly calmer.

"A difficult time?" Shouted Harry. "I have a difficult time with Snape. I had fifteen years of abuse from the Dursleys. Fifteen years." He couldn't stop the tears from coming to his eyes. "You don't have any idea what it was like do you? Those little bits you saw are nothing compared to living those fifteen years!"

"Harry I couldn't interfere. That was part of the agreement." Dumbledore said sadly, his face very gray.

"Ever since I took Occlumency lessons from Snape I have a choice of dreams at night consisting of, Sirius or Cedric dieing, Voldemort rising out of the grave yard or any one of the many wonderful memories I have with the Dursleys." Harry swallowed hard and gritting his teeth. "Memories I must have suppressed because I find myself watching in utter dismay at what I went through." Harry's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "And I know now how wrong it was."

"But you survived Harry. And that's what I had to arrange, your survival." Dumbledore insisted.

"Do you know what it's like to have no one?" Harry asked, tears still standing in his angry eyes. "No one to talk to? No one to hold on to when you're scared? No one to say good job. No one to care if you grew or shrank?" He sniffed as his voice choked. He was shaking with anger and built up resentment.

"Harry, I hated what you had to go through but I still believe, at that time, it was the best place for you." Dumbledore said firmly. "Is this what all the anger has been about? My decision to leave you with your aunt and uncle?"

Harry didn't answer for a long time. "My first year, after you told me about the mirror of Erised, it was the first time I had met you. You were really kind to me. I'd never known anything like that. And I started daydreaming about what if you had looked after me. I could have grown up at Hogwarts." Harry looked down at his shoes. "I had this whole daily routine of what it would have been like." He swallowed hard. "But now, knowing you could have taken me away from the Dursleys. And I know you could have if you had wanted to. I'm quite convinced you didn't give a damn about me." Harry snorted.

"You said something about fools who love too much, you didn't love me anymore than the Dursleys did. You were just doing your duty for the magical world." He hadn't looked up but sat staring at his feet.

"I do care about you Harry." Dumbledore said sounding hurt. He sighed tiredly. "And you are right. I did need to think of the wizarding world in regards to you. You know the prophecy. You know what is at stake."

"He will have a power the dark lord knows not." Harry slowly looked up into Dumbledore's troubled face. "How can I have so much of this power if for most of the first eleven years of my life I knew absolutely none of it?"

"Your mother gave it to you." Dumbledore said softly. "When she gave her life to save yours."

"Did you ever think," Harry said slowly. "That this power needs as much training as my wizard powers? That I needed to be exposed to it early in life to be able to draw on it?" He snorted grimly at one glance into Dumbledore's startled eyes. "I didn't think so."

"There's nothing I can do to change the past, Harry." Dumbledore said. "Even I don't have that power."

With the mention of the past, Harry remembered his conversation with Voldemort. He knew Dumbledore was the one to ask. "How could Voldemort know what Ginny wrote in Tom Riddle's Diary?"

After giving Harry a startled look at the change in subject Dumbledore asked. "You spoke with him again?" Harry gave a nod and Dumbledore considered the question. "It is a time paradox. Even though it happened in the future it affects the past."

"I don't understand." Harry shook his head as if to clear his ears.

"The diary is Tom's memories. Even if the memories change he will still recall what happens because it happened when he was younger." Dumbledore explained. "It is rather confusing. And much of it has to do with the spell Tom used on the diary."

"It is confusing." Harry nodded. "But however the method, he does remember what Ginny wrote. That's why he wanted her." He added angrily. "He thought she would be amusing."

"Harry, I am not through talking about occlumency. I will not let this matter rest." Dumbledore persisted.

"Do you think it was wrong to leave me with the Dursleys?" Harry asked slowly.

"Not at that time, Harry. I stand by my decision." Dumbledore said firmly.

"Well then I guess we are done talking about anything." Harry rose gave a short nod to him. "Headmaster." He walked quickly to the door and left the room. He half expected Dumbledore to stop him, to cast a spell to physically drag Harry back to talk to him. But not a word followed Harry from the room.

And as Harry climbed the stairs to Gryffindor tower his temper rose too. So strong was the anger in him, Harry felt the need to run but running up the stairs wasn't fast enough. He needed something more. Then Harry realized he needed to fly! Running down a corridor he transformed into a phoenix. With wings spread Harry soared up the stairs forgetting his resentment as he flew. At every window he passed Harry wished it were open. Higher, Harry wanted to fly higher and farther, to leave these wingless ones far behind him. A bright red flame erupted around him and he burst out of the fire gliding over Hogwarts castle.

Startled by the abrupt change of scene Harry faltered in his flight and he sank several meters. But he managed to recover and wing his way up to the astronomy tower. He landed on the battlement clumsily then folded his wings and peered around wondering what he should do. If he changed into his human form he could go down the stairs but most certainly Filch would catch him. Harry looked around to Gryffindor tower. His eyes were able to see in the dark and pick out details in the dim light. He spotted the common room window, that's

where he would try first. Spreading his wings Harry dropped off into the darkness with his eyes on the bright light of the window.

Concentrating hard to keep flapping Harry hovered at the window. There might be enough room for an owl to perch but there didn't seem to be enough space for a phoenix to grab hold. Harry looked inside and gasped. He burst out laughing. Ron and Hermione were snogging next to the fire. The pair broke apart and looked wildly around. They must have heard his phoenix song laugh. Harry thought. He pecked at the window.

Ron jumped up and flung the window open. "Harry?" He watched as the bird flew in to land on a chair.

"Who else would it be?" Harry laughed. "Thanks."

"What were you doing outside?" Hermione looked reproachful.

"I didn't intend to go outside. It just kind of happened, Hermione." Harry told her but her stare made him add. "Okay, I was thinking I wanted to fly higher and farther than all of a sudden I was outside. Kind of cool really." He grinned at Ron's stunned face.

"Wow Harry that is so cool. Maybe I should become an animagus." Ron considered. "I don't know if Dad and Mum would sign the form though. Might think it was too dangerous."

"Harry you have to be careful. Until you are in total control of your form it could be really dangerous for you to go flying high." Hermione lectured him.

"I do know that Hermione." Harry said with the patience of six years of Hermione's worrying. "I landed on the astronomy tower right away and considered going down the stairs but didn't want Filch to catch me so...here I am." He held out his arms like wings.

"Well, just remember to be careful." Hermione looked at the clock. "Aren't you back from Occlumency early?" She gave him a suspicious look.

“Is that why you two were snogging on the sofa, you thought you had more time?” Harry sidetracked the subject. Both Hermione and Ron went red.

“Very funny Harry.” Hermione recovered and returned irritated. “Are you jealous that you don’t have someone to kiss?”

“Now that you mention it.” Harry considered with a sigh. “Ah well. Unkindness may defeat my life, but never taint my love.” Harry coughed and frowned. “Where did that come from?”

“It’s Shakespeare again?” Hermione laughed. “Seems like the charm on the trunk has a lingering effect.”

“I don’t care what I say as long as I don’t have to wear that outfit again.” Harry said as if trying to make a bargain with his mom. “I’m going to bed. Snog on you two.” He gave a parting shot and headed up the spiral staircase.

Chapter 21

On Wednesday morning when Harry came down the spiral staircase, Ron waited with Hermione next to the notice board in the Gryffindor common room. The redhead had his arms folded and a very angry expression on his face.

"Why didn't tell us you were taken off the team?" Ron raged. "What are we going to do? We play Slytherin Saturday."

Harry sighed. He had expected this. "I'm sorry but it wasn't my idea. Ginny can use my Firebolt so she'll have an advantage over Malfoy. You did all right without me last year." He tried to sound like it wasn't a big issue but Ron wasn't accepting it.

"We had three experienced chaser last year!" Ron ranted. "Why were you banned? It has something to do with your fight with Dumbledore doesn't it?" He glared at Harry. "Why don't you give it up? He's never going to..." Ron stopped and glanced at Hermione with guarded look.

"I don't want to talk about my problem with Dumbledore." Harry said calmly.

"Well, I do." Hermione said hotly. "We're your friends Harry, we have a right to know what's going on. Because this anger you have toward Dumbledore doesn't make sense to me. I mean he's made mistakes not telling you about the prophecy sooner. But Harry, you need to learn Occlumency. Especially after what happened...." She broke off with a scared look but then steeled herself. "Especially after what happened Sunday."

Harry gazed at Hermione's concerned face and Ron's annoyed one for a long time. Considering his response carefully he said. "My anger isn't about not being told what was in the prophecy, Hermione. Actually, I can understand how hard it was for Dumbledore to tell me about the prophecy." Harry shook his head slightly. "Who would want to tell a kid something like that and I can understand the misery he went through each time he didn't tell me."

"But then why are you so angry with him?" Hermione ask again. "Because I don't understand."

"I don't think you would really understand not having lived it. It's hard for Dumbledore to understand." He dropped his gaze to the floor and sighed.

Hermione touched Harry's arm to make him look at her. "Harry, haven't I been your friend long enough to deserve an explanation?"

"Yes, you have Hermione." Harry swallowed hard. "Sit down and I'll try to explain."

Hermione took a seat in the corner away from the notice board. Ron sat down next to her and took her hand on the table in his. Harry sat across from the pair but he stared at the tabletop. With a sigh Harry began. "Hermione, when Snape gave me Occlumency lessons, he brought back a lot of memories I had forgot or suppressed. Memories with the Dursleys and what my life was really like living with them." Harry found this extremely difficult. "With physical and mental abuse no child should be subject to go through."

"What has that got to do with Dumbledore?" Hermione asked quietly.

"It was his responsibility to figure out what to do with me after my parents died. He is the one who place me with them. He knew how I was treated and yet he did nothing." Harry's teeth clenched at the thought.

"But it was for your protection from Voldemort." The moment Hermione said this she knew it wasn't the thing to say.

"Who protected me from the Dursleys?" Harry's eyes flared as he looked up at her. He took a deep breath and controlled his voice. "Hermione, you really don't know what I went through with the Dursleys." His eyes softened and he added. "And I really don't think you want to know." A lump came to his throat and he looked down again.

"I would, if you want to tell me." Hermione reached a hand out to Harry's. "Maybe I should know."

Harry sniffed trying to think of something that wouldn't be too horrible. "Hermione, do you remember being hugged by your family when you were scared or scraped your knee?"

"Of course." Hermione said quickly.

"I don't. Not once. Every fright, bruise and cut I went through all by myself. Ron's Mom gave me the first hug of comfort I ever had, in the hospital wing after Cedric had died." He blinked to keep the tears back. "Before I came to Hogwarts the number of days I spent locked into the cupboard under the stairs probably equaled the number I spent outside of it."

"I can see it's been hard Harry." Hermione started carefully. "But you did survive and that's the important thing."

"I didn't want to go into gory details but I guess I'll have to." Harry rubbed his eyes. "Right, I was about seven and I was playing in the back garden, by myself. I found this long dead tree branch and pretended to fly around on it." He bit his lip for a moment then continued. "When Uncle Vernon saw me from the kitchen window. He dragged me inside and beat me so hard I thought I was going to die." Harry looked up at Hermione's horrified face. "And the sad thing was Hermione, I wanted to. In my cupboard afterward, with my arm broken I just lay in pain hoping this was it, that I could finally leave the Dursleys."

"He broke your arm?" Hermione's hand was on her mouth and tears shone in her eyes. "How did he get away with something like that? The hospital surely would have reported something like that to the authorities."

"I didn't have to go to the hospital. The magic inside of me evidently healed it over night. So no one knew about the break. Or the beating." Harry snorted. "But Dumbledore knew. He could have stopped it, Hermione."

"I had no idea it was that bad Harry." Hermione sniffed. For a long time no one said anything. Hermione had reflective look and said tentatively. "Here's a thought Harry. If you had a different childhood you would be the person you are today. You would be different. Maybe what you went through has helped you deal with other things."

"You mean having pain in my childhood has helped me deal with the pain in my scar?" Harry said looking at her intently.

"Yes, something like that." Hermione nodded.

"The end justifies the means?" Harry asked with an arched eyebrow.

Slowly Hermione shook her head. "No it doesn't. You're right Harry. No child should go through stuff...abuse like that. But the past can't be changed. What do you want Dumbledore to do?" she asked.

"To at least admit it was the wrong place to put me." Harry's voice held a bit of the anger he had for the headmaster. "To be as horrified as you at what a child had to go through." His eyes flamed again. "To be treated like a person who is important and not just because of some stupid prophesy."

"I think that is reasonable to ask. But refusing Occlumency Harry. What if..." Hermione said worriedly. "What if Voldemort tries to possess you again?"

"I will admit Hermione. I am as concerned about that as you." Harry nodded. "But in being Dumbledore's puppet I have very few things to negotiate with." He gazed over at Ron who hadn't said a word through the whole conversation. The stunned expression on his face didn't need words. "All right Ron?"

"All right." Ron returned. "We'll beat Slytherin just for you." He grimly announced.

"Good because Slytherin hasn't beaten Gryffindor since we've been at school. And I to hate break a winning streak." Harry sighed. "We better get to breakfast."

“Thanks for telling me Harry.” Hermione said as they stood up to leave. “I know it was very hard for you.” Harry nodded at her and they left for the great hall.

Transfiguration had its ups and downs that day. Harry’s first few attempts to conjure multiple buttons at once went awry; summoning a swarm of bees instead and sending the class in to a slight panic, which gave Malfoy a chance to rag on Harry. But by the end of class Harry eventually managed to produce six perfect buttons at one time. Letting Harry smirk at Malfoy’s try to conjure a single chair.

As the class ended Professor McGonagall called to Harry. “Potter a word if you please.” Hermione and Ron gave Harry a glance and he shrugged and went over to the Professor’s desk.

“Sit down Potter.” McGonagall retreated behind her desk and folded her hands in front of her, looking very stern. “I have informed from Professor Dumbledore you are banned from quidditch because you refuse to learn Occlumency.” Harry sighed and nodded.

“I don’t know why or what problem you have with Professor Dumbledore.” McGonagall held out her hand to keep him from interrupting. “And I really don’t care Potter. That is between the two of you as far as I am concern.”

“Everybody else thinks I’m being to hard on the Headmaster, Professor.” Harry snorted.

“Professor Dumbledore is quite capable of handling a disagreement on his own with no help from me. Personally, well.” She cleared her throat. “I won’t take sides on this. It is, as I said, up to the two of you to work out.” The Professor adjusted her glasses.

“On the other hand, I am Deputy Headmistress and Head of Gryffindor house and have the other students’ well-being to insure.” McGonagall took a breath. “I must really insist you take part in your

Occlumency lessons Potter. It is imperative you learn how to block your mind from you-know-who, especially after what happened on Sunday. Surely you must see this?"

"Yes, Professor, I understand the need to control." Harry said carefully. "My life has been controlled since Voldemort put this scar on me." McGonagall winced slightly at the dark wizard's name but watched Harry closely as he considered her request. "You have always been up front with me and I respect your opinion." He sighed and rubbed his chin thinking. "I'll learn Occlumency on two conditions. First, I want to learn Legilimency along with Occlumency."

"I see no problem with that request." McGonagall nodded. "Makes perfect sense actually."

Harry drew a deep breath. "Secondly, I don't want the Headmaster teaching me." Harry could barely keep eye contact with his teacher. Her gaze was so intense he felt like a hole was being burned into him.

"Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape are the only two wizards in this school skilled enough to teach the Occlumency you need. Which is beyond the basic understanding of occlumency that most of the teachers here at Hogwarts have accomplished." McGonagall told him. "I do not know if Professor Snape would agree to teach you again, considering what happened last year."

"I'm not the wild about lessons with him either." Harry sighed in resignation. "But if he will agree." It cost Harry every bit of effort to say the words. "I will take lessons from him."

"I see." Professor McGonagall said surprised. "Well, I can ask him. But I can promise you nothing until I speak with Professor Snape."

Harry swallowed trying not to think too much about Snape. "Tell him I keep my nose out of the pensive. And." Harry met McGonagall's eyes. "You might tell him, I won't be the easy mark he had last year."

Her eyes glittered in amusement. "That just might peek his interest Potter. Very well. I'll let you know what he says. You may go on to

Charms.” McGonagall said then added. “Thank you for listening to me Potter.”

“I do try to listen to reasonable people, Professor.” Harry said as he left the classroom.

In charms on every desk, Professor Flitwick had placed a long bone from some sort of creature. “Repairing bones is more difficult than healing wounds.” As he spoke he waved a slender bone in the air. “We cannot of course have volunteers break bones just to heal them. So we will try the repairing charm with the bit of skeleton I have placed before you.” The little wizard then bent the bone and it broke. Professor placed the bone on his desk, took out his wand and said. “Osis Sanitas.” The bone seemed to melt back together. The class clapped. “Thank you. You may now try.”

A horrible cracking noise resounded around the classroom as the students broke the bone in front of them. The class worked all period but only Hermione managed to fuse any part of the bone together.

“Do not be discouraged. It is a very difficult spell.” Flitwick told them as they brought the pieces of bones to his desk at the end of the class. Most wizards or witches will differ to let a trained medi wizard or healer repair a broken bone even if they can do the spell themselves. But it is a good spell to know if a healer is not available.”

Harry, Ron and Hermione headed for lunch. As Hermione spooned stew into bowls for the three of them Harry noticed she seemed distracted. “What’s up?” He asked as she handed him a second bowl of stew.

“Oh, nothing.” When Harry still stared at her, Hermione just shook her head and laughed. “I am just wondering how is it you are so good at Transfiguration all of sudden.” Hermione shrugged.

“You mean you don’t like being second best at something you were once the best.” Ron snorted then froze when he realized it wasn’t

something you said to your girl friend. "Sorry Hermione, I didn't mean it the way it sounded." He stuttered.

"I know what you mean Ron." Hermione rolled her eyes and gazed at him sitting beside her. "And you did mean it like that. But you needn't worry I can take a joke." She looked back at Harry. "But it is quite amazing. Don't you think?"

"What's amazing?" Neville had just sat down beside Harry. He filled a bowl with stew and grabbed some rolls from a basket. Hermione told Neville about Harry's sudden prowess in Transfiguration. Neville smiled slyly. "Well, it's not all that surprising Hermione, considering his scrofungulus infection this summer."

"What do you mean? And how did you know about that?" Harry asked turning to look at Neville.

"I know because I went to St Mungos to visit my parents. The whole hospital was talking about how sick you were. I went down to try to see you but of course they wouldn't let me." Neville told them between bites of stew and roll. "But I did speak to Healer Davis about the types of treatments you were receiving. A few of the potions had ingredients that could have either damaged or enhanced your mental capacities."

"But wouldn't Professor McGonagall have known? She seems as shocked as anyone." Ron asked.

"Not with the potions the healer tried." Neville glanced at Harry. "You were so ill Healer Davis didn't have much hope for your recovery. I was really afraid for you, Harry." He said sadly. "I expected to go in any day to hear you had died." Neville shook himself out of his glumness to continue. "Anyway, most of the medications were experimental because the regular treatments weren't working." He paused to take drink of pumpkin juice. "I went back almost every day to see what new treatment he was trying."

"What ingredient could cause such a tremendous jump in ability?" Hermione asked frowning. "I find it hard to believe it would affect him that much."

“Well, benzoin awakens higher mindedness as does horehound and galangal. I think he used eyebright too.” Neville considered. “I know he used many herbs with protective and strengthening actions.”

“But still, Neville, Harry’s ability is too much of a jump for a plant to have influence it.” Hermione insisted.

“For one plant, I would agree Hermione. But Harry was treated for three weeks. With many different plants in mixtures even Healer Davis wasn’t sure would cure or kill him.” Neville said gravely. “You were that sick, Harry and the Healers were that desperate.” Hermione still looked skeptical so he added. “Combine that with a very rare strain of scrofungulus, which by the way came from the most unlikely place of Burkina Faso,” Neville shrugged raising his eyebrows. “Anything could happen. I’m glad it was for the good and not for the bad.”

“Cheers Neville.” Harry said thoughtfully. For some reason it just hit him how really sick he had been last summer. Then he thought of something. “You know I remember Healer Davis always asking me if I felt any different. Neville, are there any other parts of me these potions could have affected?”

Neville’s round face went pink and he looked down at his stew and stirred it with his spoon. “I know he used dragon blood and it can...” The color on his face deepened. “Umm increase your virility, strength and passion.” He said quickly and took a mouthful of stew.

Ron snickered then sobered quickly. He gave Harry a critical look but didn’t say anything. Harry could guess Ron was thinking about Ginny and him, in the wood together, alone. Even though his face burned from embarrassment Harry said. “Well, that’s not so bad. Might come in handy.”

Hermione pretended not to have noticed the way the conversation had gone. “But what was a strain of scrofungulus from Burkina Faso doing on Harry’s mom’s letters?” She asked frowning. “That is odd.”

“Nobody seemed to know how the letters could have become contaminated with it.” Neville said shrugging. “It’s just one of those things you’ll probably never find out.” He finished his stew and pulled a helping of pudding toward him.

Defense Against the Dark Arts class began with its usually set of calisthenics then a run around the castle. Harry, Ron and Malfoy usually ran at the front of the group when the order came for the sprint to the stone steps of the castle. Ron and Malfoy were both taller than him and had longer legs but Harry always managed to out sprint them. He assumed his experience running away from Dudley and his gang gave him an edge.

After the physical workout Malahide introduced two new spells. “Tutela Quidam protects a person you specify from minor and some major curses. Fervefacio Abiego will cause a wave of heat to be sent from your wand. Done correctly it can melt the flesh right off your enemy.”

The class broke up into groups of three with Harry ending up with Malfoy and Neville. The object of the lesson was for one to cast the protection spell and the other to cast a minor curse to see if the protection was affective. Malfoy gritted is teeth as he cast the new spell on Neville. Evidently the Slytherin was too leery of Malahide to try anything bad. Harry cast a jelly-legs jinx on Neville and Malfoy’s protection spell held for only a moment before Neville was staggering around on wiggling legs.

“Not quite there Malfoy.” Harry said as he cast the counter spell to stop Neville dancing. “Try again.” Harry had too much on his mind so as long as Malfoy didn’t cause any problems he wouldn’t. Malfoy glared at him but recast the spell with more force. The curse Harry cast at Neville was deflected. “Seemed to work that time. Neville want to try me?”

Neville nodded and concentrating hard said. “Tutela Quidam.”

As Malfoy raised his wand to cast a curse toward him, Harry saw a flash of anger in the blonde's gray eyes. "Fervefacio Abiego." He shouted. A wave of heat scorched the hair from Harry's face. An outcry from Neville brought Malahide to their side before Harry could curse Malfoy.

"Hospital Potter." Malahide ordered with his eyes on Malfoy. "Malfoy. Get out and don't come back. I told you before I will not tolerate petty quarrels in my units." Malfoy eyed the professor with great loathing but without a word headed toward the lockers.

Feeling his face burning Harry walked quickly to the infirmary. He looked around for Madam Pomfrey and found her in the office off the ward.

"You again?" It seemed to have become her normal greeting for Harry. The nurse ushered him to sit on a bed. She examined his burned face. "Not to worry, I'll be able to heal this straight away. Mainly just a surface wound." Madam Pomfrey bustled away then brought back a familiar orange paste. She slathered it over Harry's face; he found the paste soothing to the burn.

"Sit there a bit while the salve works." The nurse studied him for a moment. "You've gotten taller" He nodded wondering about her intent stare. "I am glad you are completely recovered from your summer illness." Madam Pomfrey finally said.

"Oh, that." Harry thought it strange the illness had been brought up twice in the same day. He told her what Neville had said at lunch about his treatments. "Could the potions have affected me that much?"

The nurse thought for a long time and slowly began to nod. "I think I'll have to agree with Mr. Longbottom. The medications certainly could affect your abilities in many ways. Hopefully all to the good." Madam Pomfrey said.

When Harry was healed he headed to the Transfiguration classroom for his animagus training. As he arrived the door opened and students began to emerge. A very pretty girl with long black hair exited then stopped and stared at Harry. Cho Chang stood looking at him while her classmates bumped into her as they squeezed past to leave the room. She took another step closer.

"Hi Harry." Cho said quietly.

"Hi," Harry nodded. He wasn't sure of his feeling toward Cho but he would be happy just being on speaking terms.

"I heard about your illness this summer." Cho seemed very sad. "I was really scared."

That blasted sickness, how many times was he going to hear about it today. "Ah right. I'm fine really." Harry searched his mind to find something to say. "Uh, how was your summer?"

"Oh fine. We went to France on Holiday." Cho smiled. "It was great."

"Sounds like it would be fun." Harry was beginning to feel this was way too much work; thinking up things to talk about to Cho.

"Well, I better go. See you around Harry." Cho waved and headed off down the hall.

"See ya." Harry watched her go, trying to decide how he felt about Cho. He liked her but couldn't see the two of them getting together again. He sighed and went into the empty classroom.

"Potter, Good afternoon." Professor McGonagall said as he came over to her desk. She was piling scrolls into a large tartan canvas bag.

"Hi, Professor. Did you speak to him?" Harry couldn't say his name.

"Yes, I spoke with Professor Snape." McGonagall sighed. "And Professor Snape said he would consider it and get back with me."

“When?” Harry asked frowning.

“When do you think?” Professor McGonagall’s eyebrows arched and she sat down in her chair.

“He’s going to wait until after Gryffindor plays Slytherin.” Harry said angrily slamming his book bag to the floor. “That...”

“Careful Potter, he is a teacher here.” Professor McGonagall’s nostrils flared. “What else would he do?” She stared at Harry and suggested quietly. “You could take one Occlumency class with the Headmaster, couldn’t you?”

Closing his eyes, Harry sighed. Leave it to Snape to hold out for the quidditch match. “I suppose. I can’t stand the thought of Slytherin winning against Gryffindor. No sense cutting off my nose to spite my face.” When Harry opened his eyes to give McGonagall a wry smile he saw a stunned expression.

“I don’t know what to say Potter. I thought you were bullheaded enough to refuse.” McGonagall almost laughed. “Well good. I will inform Professor Dumbledore of your decision.”

“Now for your animagus training. How goes it?” McGonagall listened intently as Harry came clean about his unscheduled flight outside of the castle.

“I didn’t mean to Professor. It just kind of happened.” Harry waited for a lecture as he finished the story.

“Not bad Potter, Not bad at all.” When she saw the surprise in his face McGonagall said. “You handled the situation with a cool head. You did exactly what you should have. Well, maybe you should have come down the stair but I understand why you chose not to.”

“You’re not angry?” The words sort of slipped out of Harry.

“For trying your wings? I should think not.” McGonagall seemed insulted. “The euphoria you felt, the wanting to fly higher and farther, was the phoenix dominating your thoughts. You must work on

controlling those instinctual tendencies without suppressing the natural abilities of your animagus form.”

“Oh,” Harry felt amazed McGonagall understood all he had felt. “What now?”

“First you will practice transforming, holding it for a specific amount of time and then returning to your human self.” McGonagall told him returning his widening smile in her eyes.

In his phoenix form Harry practiced flying around the classroom and landing until the professor would tell him to change back. He learned quickly not to be perched on the back of a chair when turning back into human Harry. When the lesson was over McGonagall put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “How do you feel? Tired?”

“A little but not overly so.” Harry considered. “It’s the greatest thing I’ve ever done.” He added smiling. “Even better than Quidditch.”

“That is saying something. However, you can’t catch the snitch as a phoenix.” McGonagall paused for a moment then shook her head. “At least I’m pretty sure you can’t. Off you go Potter, I’ve got things to do.”

“Thanks Professor McGonagall.” Harry started to leave but turned and gave her a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks so much.” Harry disappeared out the door leaving a very bewildered McGonagall behind him.

Chapter 22

As Harry walked back through the castle to Gryffindor tower, he tried to figure out what had come over him back with McGonagall. He was deeply grateful of her help with his animagus training but Harry rarely felt or acted on any physical contact with people, least of all an authority figure. Still, Harry thought with a smile, he had suddenly felt a fondness for McGonagall akin to older sister or an aunt. Very few people in his life had touched him that closely and for six years now McGonagall was an anchor he could always count upon to be there. Add that to both of them being an animagus, the normal wall that separated them seemed to be at half the height.

For some reason tears sprang to his eyes, Harry quickly rubbed them away. Only he would be analyzing a simple show of affection to someone. Most people probably wouldn't give a second thought about it. Most people know when hugs and kisses are acceptable or appropriate. Most people learned growing up about expression of consideration. But he wasn't most people. Harry sighed.

"Password." Harry stopped in front of the portrait of the fat lady. His thinking had carried him all the way to the tower.

"Cat's Paw." Harry said. The portrait swung forward and he crawled through the hole. Harry deposited his school bag on his bed. Then he went to his trunk for his Firebolt, play books and his quidditch robes. Then he remembered Ron wouldn't be at practice. Considering his options Harry decided to have Seamus play keeper for the night. He headed back down the spiral staircase. At the bottom Harry tripped and fell hard. A black nose with white whiskers snuffed at his face.

"Hi spy cat. Still getting underfoot I see." Harry sat up and rubbed the kitten's back. "You're growing. Getting kind of fluffy too." The kitten purred loudly and crawled into his lap. "Does Ginny know you're out of your crate?" Harry knew he couldn't put the kitten back in the girls' dorm. "Well, I do have to go. Quidditch you know." Why was he talking to the cat he asked himself? Cleo mewed piteously and crawled into a robe pocket. "I can't take you with me." Harry told it. "I'm going flying. Understand?" The kitten gave a cheerful purring

meow. "You want to fly?" Why was he still talking to a cat? "Fine just hang on and don't blame me if you get scared out of your little white boots."

When Harry started changing in the locker room, Cleo climbed out of his regular robes and waited until he had put on his scarlet quidditch robes. Then she delicately crept into an inside pocket. Harry gave her shrugged. The other Gryffindor team members began to show up.

"Hey Seamus." Harry called. "I need you to play keeper tonight. Ron's got detention with Snape."

"No problem Harry." Seamus said. "Might be interesting."

As he warmed the team up with catching and throwing drills, Harry almost forgot about Cleo until he looked down and saw her white paws on the broom. "So you do like to fly? Must have been that flight with Hedwig eh?" He barely had time to catch the quaffle sent his way by Colin but he managed to grab it with the tips of his fingers then flung it to Ginny. Then Harry had the two beaters slug one bludger back and forth while the rest of the team took turns flying between the two beaters.

Harry flew over beside Ginny and nudged her. She gasped when she saw Cleo riding on Harry's broom. He laughed and told Ginny how Cleo had bummed a ride from him. "My only worry is she'll want to play Quidditch next." Harry still kept his eyes on the steadily improving beaters Andrew Kirk and Jack Sloper.

"I never thought a cat would want to fly!" Ginny had kept one eye on the bludger hurling toward them. "Harry," She warned and as one the two dropped into a dive and wheeled around as Jack Sloper came in pursuit of the bludger.

"Sorry." Jack smacked it back toward Andrew.

After the warm up Harry had the chasers go through some formations they had been working on. Then the chasers tried to shoot goals with Seamus guarding the hoops. With growing irritation Harry watched his chasers. The teamwork was rubbish. Ginny and Colin were

doing great. The problem was Dean Thomas. Anytime he had the quaffle, Dean would never throw it to Ginny. He either kept it or tossed it to Colin even if Ginny was closer and in a better position. At last he called a halt the practice and sent them to the locker room.

“Dean, hang on.” Harry said above the wind, whistling through the three hoops.

“What?” Dean asked irritated.

“What it is, is this. I know you’ve had a fight with Ginny.” Harry held up his hand. “That’s between the two of you and I don’t want to hear about it. But we’re a team Dean. If you can’t keep your feelings off the quidditch pitch you’re no good to the team.” Harry gave him a warning look. “If I see any hint of this attitude on Friday’s practice, I’ll start Seamus as chaser Saturday. I just want you to know where things stand.”

Dean had the decency to be ashamed. “I’m sorry Harry. You’re right. I promise I’ll shape up on Friday.” They both started walking to the changing room.

“Good. You’re really getting good. I didn’t want to change the lineup.” Harry clapped him on the back. “I’m starving how about dinner?” Inwardly Harry sighed with relief over his first confrontation as quidditch team captain.

Half way through dinner Wednesday evening Professor Dumbledore rose to speak to the school and the great hall fell silent.

“I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is; after the incident last weekend, all Hogsmeade weekends are hereby cancelled.” A loud rumble of disappointment came from all tables. The headmaster smiled. “However, the good news is; a dance for third years and up will replace the scheduled Hogsmeade weekends.” A loud cheer went up. He nodded smiling. “Yes, quite an enjoyable alternative. I realize not everyone will have packed the necessary attire for such galas so I have sent invitations to Madam Malkin’s

Robes for All Occasions and Gladrags Wizardwear to come next week so any student needing new dress robes can be fitted.” Another cheer went up, mainly from the girls around the hall. “Well, I think that is all the news I have for the night.” Dumbledore nodded and sat down.

The babble in the hall broke out immediately. “Hermione? Will you go to the next dance with me?” Ron’s face was bright pink but he grinned broadly.

“I would love to Ron.” Hermione flushed too but smiled back at the red head.

“Great.” Ron sighed still smiling. He looked at Harry who felt strange listening to Ron and Hermione arrange a date. “Who are you going to ask Harry?”

“I dunno.” Harry cringed at the memory of his last dance. Then he saw Ron’s eyes flick several times toward Ginny and he gave Ron a glare to make him stop.

Dean Thomas sat down beside Ginny before Ron could make any remark he asked her, “Ginny would you go with me to the dance?”

“I don’t think so Dean.” Ginny looked at Dean and sighed. “I still like you. Let’s just keep it at that okay.”

Dean nodded and glanced at Harry before getting up and leaving the hall. Ginny sighed and got up too. “I’ve got homework. See you later.”

“Why didn’t you ask her, Harry?” Ron nudged his arm after Ginny had left.

“I don’t appreciate being put on the spot like that Weasley.” Harry gritted his teeth as he turned on his friend. “Remember I still have a whole box of Weasley Wizarding Wheezes. And I have been wanting to try them on someone.”

“Sorry, I won’t do it again.” Ron assured him. “I was just wondering who you were interested in.”

Harry yawned. “Right now I think I’m most interested in some sleep.” He rose from the table. “Goodnight.”

All during Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures Harry was preoccupied about his up coming Occlumency lesson with Dumbledore. Although the session couldn’t be as bad as with Snape, Harry still didn’t like the prospect of struggle with Dumbledore mentally.

In the afternoon Harry hesitantly entered the transfiguration classroom wondering if McGonagall would say anything about his display on Tuesday. He dropped his school bag next to a seat and looked around. He saw a tabby cat with bespectacled markings sitting on the teacher’s desk. Harry laughed. “Good afternoon, Professor.” The cat stretched and purred so Harry moved closer to the desk. The cat then rubbed its whiskers on Harry’s outstretched hand purring loudly. Smiling Harry automatically stroked the cat almost forgetting it was his teacher. Rubbing his hand one last time, the cat turned and jumped on to the chair. Professor McGonagall appeared a moment later.

“Good afternoon, Harry.” McGonagall said. “I think for your animagus training today, we’ll see if you can hold your form for the entire period.” He noticed she used his first name instead of his last.

“Great. Now?” Harry received a nod from his teacher. Taking a deep breath Harry concentrated on releasing his phoenix form. A warmth spread through his body and he felt his body change. After flying around the room a while, Harry wondered what else he could do as a phoenix in the classroom. Finding a steady perch on a coat stand he peered around the room with his phoenix eyes. Details and shapes appeared sharper, Colors more vibrant Harry noticed. Tilting his head he heard McGonagall’s heart beating and the blood rushing in her veins. He lifted a talon and examined his long golden claws. The next moment Harry found himself cleaning between his toes with

his tongue. He heard a chuckle from McGonagall and turned to look at her.

“Clean away Potter. It’s normal.” She pulled out some papers to grade. “By the way, I was quite impressed with your thoughts on conjuring spells.” McGonagall held up his three scrolls. “Full marks.” Harry sang several clear tones. “You do make a good phoenix Potter.” She said approvingly. When McGonagall finally told him to change back at the end of their session Harry did so reluctantly.

“That was excellent.” Harry grinned. “I can’t wait until I can go outside and fly.”

“Are you tired or feeling strained at all?” McGonagall was all business now.

“No not a bit, Professor.” Harry assured her as he picked up his school bag. He frowned. “Why do so few witches and wizards choose to become animagi? Hermione said only seven this century has registered. I find it...incredible.”

“There are a lot more than you think.” McGonagall pulling her glass down to look over them. “I think the ministry has estimated for every one animagus who is registered there are thirty who are not. I think that number is a low.”

“Oh, I should have thought about that.” Harry nodded thinking of his father and Sirius. Not to mention Rita Skeeter. “Thanks for the help Professor.”

“You are quite welcome Harry.” McGonagall continued to eye Harry and he looked at her questioningly. “Teaching is often a thankless profession but on occasion a student comes along to make all the work worth the effort. Thank you, Harry Potter.” She gave him a nod and pushed her glasses back on her nose.

McGonagall’s words kept Harry’s mind off of occlumency until he stood at the transfiguration classroom once again. He knocked on

the door then entered. Dumbledore was sitting at the desk wearing creamy white robes trimmed in gold.

“Good evening Harry.” Dumbledore said brightly.

“Headmaster.” Harry nodded with no emotion. Dumbledore sighed.

“Professor McGonagall said you would like to learn Legilimency. It is a difficult form of magic but I think you are up to the task.” Dumbledore told him. “I think we should begin with Legilimency since after occlumency you may feel too tired.”

“Right, Headmaster.” Harry couldn’t help himself feeling bit excited about learning something new. Dumbledore eyed him for a moment.

“When you cast the Legilimens spell you’ll want to maintain eye contact and think of looking through the eyes to the mind. Being as old as I am, I cannot remove all the secrets in my mind to the pensieve. So I will deflect you from memories I do not wish to share.” Dumbledore said. “But I must tell some of the things you might see could be disturbing.”

Harry met the old wizard’s eyes and realized the great privilege Dumbledore was allowing him. To enter the mind of what most of wizarding world considered the greatest wizard of the age. To let down his guard for Harry to see the things he has experienced in his lifetime. Suddenly Harry felt quite disconcerted and very undeserving. He swallowed nervously.

“I am ready when you are Harry.” Dumbledore prompted and waited.

Harry took out his wand and noticed his hand was shaking. Gripping his wand tighter to stop the tremble he gazed unblinking into those brilliant blue eyes. “Legilimens.” Harry cried tentatively. Nothing seemed to happen.

“A bit more force is needed.” Dumbledore suggested not blinking.

“Right.” Harry took a deep breath and tried again. “Legilimens.” He pushed his mind into Dumbledore’s. A gasp formed on his lips as

images flashed past him. Dumbledore with his arms outstretched at the welcoming feast. Year after year flashed by counted by the change of robes and the color of Dumbledore's hair. A tall handsome man stood beside a beautiful blonde woman holding a baby. Pride and love flooded into Harry. The scene changed with a flash. An older Dumbledore cradling a battered ravaged young man in his arms on what looked like a theatre of war. Sadness and grief almost overwhelmed Harry. He pulled away from that memory in search of happier thoughts. A bedroom filled his mind and a sensation of great sensuous pleasure.

Suddenly Harry was back in the classroom. "Ah, there are some things a man must keep discreetly to himself." Dumbledore smiled his cheeks a little pink.

"Sorry." Harry was flushed as well.

"No need to be." Dumbledore said quietly.

"Who was the man with the woman and baby?" Harry asked curiously.

"Myself and my wife and son." Dumbledore sighed sadly. "And the man on the battlefield was my son as a man. He died protecting my back from Grindelwald's followers."

"I didn't know you had any children." Harry wondered why he hadn't thought about it.

"I have many." Dumbledore smiled and he held out his arms to indicate the school. "Perhaps there will be a time we can sit and I will tell you about my children. But now you must practice occlumency."

Harry nodded not knowing what to say. He occupied himself clearing his mind and trying to calm the feelings Harry had gleamed from Dumbledore. "I'm ready." Harry finally said.

Dumbledore took out his wand and cast the spell. "Legilimens." The force the professor used was almost as tentative as Harry's first try.

Harry found blocking Dumbledore's intrusion quite easy but like lessons with Snape the scar on his forehead prickled with pain.

"Ah, I see I'll need to use a bit more force also. Legilimens" He cried again. Dumbledore didn't get very far, only recent memories flashed by Harry before he succeeded in closing his thoughts. Still his forehead seemed to sizzle with added pain. "How were you flying?" Dumbledore asked puzzled. "I saw no broom."

It took a moment for Harry to focus on the question. He looked at Dumbledore in surprise. "Didn't Professor McGonagall tell you my animagus form?"

"Professor McGonagall said it was up to you to tell me of your animagus appearance." Dumbledore said half smiling. "I assume it is a kind of bird?"

Harry snorted and grinned. "Yes, a bird. I'm surprised she didn't tell you." He rubbed his forehead thinking of his phoenix self. "I can show you." Harry offered still blinking with the pain.

"I would like to see your animagus form." Dumbledore gave a slight bow and smiled. The smile slid from the old wizard's face when Harry's Phoenix self appeared before him. "By Merlin! Extraordinary. A phoenix!" He looked at the scarlet bird in awe.

When Harry changed back to his human shape he could help but laugh a bit at the Headmaster's shock. "Pretty cool eh?"

"Extremely so." Dumbledore laughed but continued to stare at Harry in wonder. "How Professor McGonagall kept this from me I will never know. Do you know if you can fire travel?"

Nodding Harry told him about his flight outside. Then Harry looked stunned and put a hand on his forehead. "The pain in my scar, it's gone!" Harry rubbed a finger on his scar. "Do you think my animagus phoenix relieved it?"

"I see no other explanation. Astounding." Dumbledore said obviously thinking hard. "Do you know how unusual being a phoenix animagus

is Harry? Never in all my days have I heard of such a transformation possible.” The old wizard shook himself out of his amazement. “We should continue with occlumency. Harry nodded and Dumbledore raised his wand. “Legilimens.”

The next moment Harry found himself locked in the cupboard under the stairs, hot and stuffy so it must have been summer. A sharp pain made him gasp as the memory changed to earlier childhood thoughts. Barely able to keep his eyes open Harry concentrated on pushing the intruding mind away. Slowly he repelled Dumbledore and the classroom reappeared. Harry was on his knees panting and clutching his forehead, squinting as if in bright light.

“Are you all right Harry?” Dumbledore took his arm to help him up. But Harry couldn’t stand yet. The pain continued to intensify.

“He’s angry with someone.” Harry managed to gasp. He felt sick and closed his eyes. A hand was rubbing his back as he shook with pain trying not to throw up. Slowly the pain subsided and Harry chanced to open his eyes. Dumbledore knelt beside him, half holding Harry as he rubbed his back. A very worried look was in the Headmaster’s face.

“Perhaps you should see Madam Pomfrey.” Dumbledore said still rubbing Harry’s back.

“It goes away eventually.” Harry found the back rub soothing despite himself. “Why does it hurt so much? Lessons with Snape were about the same. My scar hurt worse afterward.”

“I didn’t know the pain you experienced was this intense.” Dumbledore said. “I understand why you didn’t want to participate now.” Harry pulled away from the old man and stood up on swaying legs.

“It wasn’t because of the pain today. It is the pain of the past that’s unbearable.” Harry said angrily. He leaned heavily on a desk taking deep breaths. Straightening up Harry faced Dumbledore still gritting his teeth from the pain. “I’m ready.”

The old wizard surveyed Harry and nodded. "Legilimens."

By the time Harry left the transfiguration classroom he was shaking and sweaty. Waiting until he had climbed to the third floor, Harry changed into the phoenix and immediately flew to the fat lady's portrait. The pain was gone but Harry was tired and wrung out from the occlumency session. Barely giving Ron and Hermione a greeting Harry went up the spiral stairs to the dormitory. Fully clothed Harry collapsed into his four-poster bed and was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Author's notes: Thanks for the reviews! That's what keeps me going. Things are beginning to get complicated so updates may take a little longer. Meshing things together takes a bit of planning. I don't want to forget anything important. Especially what's in the trunk.

Chapter 23

Saturday, a curtain of gray clouds blocked the morning sun. The Gryffindor quidditch team went down to breakfast in the great hall to find their captain already there eating toast. Nerves had made for restless night for Harry so he had risen early. He was always a bit anxious for a game but combine that with being captain of the team this year and Harry definitely felt the strain of command.

A rain filled breeze blew as the team headed across the castle grounds to the quidditch field. Harry hoped the heavy rain showing in the distance would hold off until after the match. Everybody changed into their scarlet quidditch robes and looked expectantly at their captain. Harry cringed when he realized he had to give them all a pep talk. He hadn't even thought about saying anything to the team before the game. Taking a deep breath he tried to remember some of Oliver Wood's better comments. He exhaled; Harry couldn't recall a single thing worth repeating. He would have to wing it.

"You all know what the Slytherins are like. So I want you to watch yourselves out there." Harry started nervously. "Use your brains not your brawn." He gave them a grim smile. "And even when we win, watch your back and teammates' back. Don't start celebrating until you have both feet on the ground. Keep focused and keep it together."

Ron started clapping and the rest of the team followed suit. Harry blushed and said. "It's time! Let's go." The team turned and followed him out of the changing room on to the quidditch field. Cheers went up from the Gryffindor stands and dozens of scarlet pennants waved.

Madam Hooch stood in the middle of the pitch as they lined up opposite the Slytherin team dressed in their green quidditch robes. To Harry's surprise Draco Malfoy was standing across from him. Malfoy was the Slytherins' captain. Madam Hooch called the two captains forward to shake hands. Harry didn't flinch as Malfoy tried to break his fingers. He merely returned the pressure in kind. The blonde didn't wince but when they let go Malfoy made a point of showing his broom to Harry, giving him a wordless smirk. A sleek black handled broom had a silvery brand on the end, Surewood P15.

The same broom had appeared on the cover of Which Broomstick last month.

“Mount your brooms!” Madam Hooch called. And then with her shrill whistle she kicked open the box, letting loose the two bludgers and the golden snitch. She tossed out the quaffle and they were off.

His heart sank as Malfoy streaked past Harry. Then to add to the insult Malfoy made a circuit around the pitch and over took him again. Trying to ignore the Slytherin’s antics Harry kept one eye out for the snitch and one on his team near the Slytherin’s goal posts. Ginny had the quaffle then passed it to Dean. Dean feinted to pass it on to Colin but dropped it instead to Ginny’s waiting hands below him. She gave a quick throw and scored. The Gryffindors cheered.

Malfoy took the moment as everybody focused on the goal to slam into Harry. “Sorry Potter didn’t see you there, going so slow.” Harry glared back as he sped away from Malfoy. But Malfoy overtook him laughing. Harry turned and went the other way but found Malfoy zooming by him. Anytime Harry changed directions Malfoy made a point of speeding past him. If Madam Hooch’s attention was focused elsewhere, Malfoy would thud into Harry as he past. This new game of Malfoy’s was getting old quickly not to mention dangerous as with each contact Malfoy seemed determined to knock Harry off his broom.

As Harry flew at full speed around the field and Malfoy zipped past once again, Harry noticed that while the Surewood P15 was much faster than his Firebolt Malfoy appeared to have trouble controlling the broom at full speed turns. No wonder the International Association of Quidditch had not approved the Surewood P15 broom for quidditch matches.

Harry didn’t think Malfoy would be stupid enough to fall for the Wronksi Feint but something similar might work. With all the speed he could eek out of his Firebolt Harry quickly turned as if seeing the snitch. Harry weaved around the other players listening to see if Malfoy was catching up. When a telltale whistling approached from behind and to the right Harry streaked off toward the stands straight for the solid wall below the watching crowd. As Malfoy put on a spurt of speed to get ahead Harry pulled hard left. There was satisfying

crunching noise and when Harry looked back Malfoy was sprawled on the ground. A time out whistle blew from Madam Hooch.

Harry glided around the field looking for the snitch as Madam Pomfrey patched up Malfoy. Glancing down Harry saw two little white paws gripping his broom handle. "How on earth did you get here?" Harry glanced around. He didn't want to find out too late that it was against the rules of quidditch to fly with a cat. So spotting Hermione in the stands he flew over and gently deposited Cleo into her lap. "I didn't know I had a stole away." He told her then Harry flew off still looking for the snitch.

Soon Malfoy was back in the air, looking furious. Taking full advantage of his Firebolt's maneuverability Harry often turned on his broom tail and took off in the other direction. Finally this tactic paid off, when Malfoy couldn't get his broom turned until he was well past the Slytherin hoops and Harry was halfway back down the field.

Ginny flew by with the quaffle, the other chasers trying to catch up to her. Then Harry saw the snitch, flying up toward him from the ground. Harry laughed as he closed his hands around the fluttering golden ball. This had to be the easiest catch he had ever made. A roar went up from the stands when Harry held the snitch up.

"Gryffindor wins!" Madam Hooch blew her whistle.

Harry landed near the Gryffindor goals and watched closely as his team flew to the ground beside him. With the crowd of Gryffindors around them cheering and shouting, Harry couldn't see if all the team had landed. He looked up to check the sky for scarlet robes and he gasped. "Ginny! Ron!" Harry grabbed Ron's shoulder and pointed. They tried to pull away from the well-wishers to get back into the air.

At least three hundred feet above the Slytherin goals, Malfoy struggled with Ginny, pulling her broom higher and higher. He saw Ginny take a swing at Malfoy and connect but then a scream issued from the stands as Ginny lost her grip and fell. Ron and Harry broke free of the crowd but it was no good. No broom could catch her now.

From somewhere inside him, Harry heard the clear song of a phoenix. Breaking into a run Harry changed into his phoenix form. But as he soared upward, Harry knew flying wouldn't be fast enough. Concentrating on being there, Harry burst into flames and appeared a second later in a flash of fire just below Ginny. Flicking his tail into her flailing hands as she dropped past him, Harry felt her grab hold. Giving several beats of his scarlet wings Harry flew over to where the Gryffindors stood looking up in awed silence. Harry slowly lowered Ginny to the ground near Ron, Hermione and Professor McGonagall then landed beside them. The crowd exploded with shouts and cheers. When Harry had changed back into his human form he looked at his teacher.

"So much for anonymity." Harry gave her a wry smile. Shaking from fright Ginny and Hermione engulfed Harry in a hug while Ron patted his back.

The Gryffindor common room rocked with noise as the house celebrated winning over Slytherins yet again. Harry and Ron had disappeared for an hour and returned with bottles of butterbeer and many sweets to toss around. The pair felt they needed to keep alive the Fred and George tradition of grand a party after a winning match.

If he hadn't been captain of the team Harry would have gone to bed early but he felt an obligation to remain to keep things under control. It was all he could do to keep from snapping at the people asking him to see his animagus form. They didn't seem to understand it wasn't some sort of circus act. But after repeated refusals the disappointed Gryffindors gave up trying to get Harry to change into a phoenix once more. Many had missed seeing the whole incident and didn't really believe the story.

Although Malfoy hadn't been expelled for his act, he had been banned from quidditch for the rest of the year and given detention. Plus fifty points had been taken from Slytherin house. Ron was enraged that Malfoy hadn't been chucked out of the school for good. Ginny had been very quiet and when she thought no one was looking slipped over to the stairs to the girls' dorms. Her departure had not

gone unnoticed by Harry who had wondered why she seemed so troubled all evening. Finally at midnight Hermione called a halt to the party over Ron's protest but Harry gave her a grateful smile.

Harry woke early again on Sunday. The sun was just breaking over the windowsill. Feeling the need to be outside in the sun, Harry dressed quickly and got his Firebolt from his trunk. He hurried down the spiral stairs. In the common room was a small figure sitting near the fire.

"Hi Harry," Mark Evans said quietly.

"Alright Mark?" Harry stopped looked at him closely. It looked like Mark had been crying.

"Yeah." Mark shrugged.

"I'm going to the quidditch field to fly around a bit. Want to come along?" Harry offered. He felt a little guilty for not paying more attention to the boy from his neighborhood.

"Fly? With you?" Mark's eyes flew open. "I don't fly to well. And I don't have broom."

"I can get you a broom from the school shed. As for flying, it takes practice." Harry said.

"Ah, you don't want me slowing you down." Mark shook his head.

"If I didn't want you a long I wouldn't have asked." Harry told him. "So come on." He pushed the portrait open and climbed out with Mark close behind him.

At the broom shed Harry picked out the best broom he could find in the school's assortment. Which wasn't saying much as the twigs stuck out even after Harry trimmed some of them off. He told the

first year to follow his movements. Not to think too much about how to do fly but just feel the motions he made. Harry started off slowly letting Mark fly beside him. When the boy seemed more confident Harry picked up the pace. The school's broom could not compare to the Firebolt's speed but by the time they two were ready for breakfast Mark could zip in and out of all the quidditch hoops as fast as his broom could go.

As they walked back across the castle's grounds Mark chatted happily with Harry. Surprisingly Harry didn't mind Mark. He wasn't awe struck annoying like Colin Creevey had been.

"I wrote my folks about you being here at Hogwarts." Mark told him. "At first they told me to stay away from you." Then he added in a hurry after Harry gave him an annoyed look. "Because of them thinking you went to St. Brutus's and all. But I told them that was all a lie from the Dursleys."

"Cheers." Harry sighed.

"They still aren't sure about all this magic stuff." Mark said hesitantly. "Me too if you want to know the truth."

"Having trouble fitting in?" Harry glanced at him. So that's why the first year had been up so early.

"I don't know." Mark watched his feet as the pair climbed the stone steps to the Castle. "The four other guys in my dorm are friendly but they all knew each other before they came here."

"And you're kind of left out." Harry sighed. "Neville in my year seemed like the odd kid out but I never minded him hanging out with Ron and me. I don't think Dean and Seamus did either. My advice, Mark is to find something you like to do and concentrate on that."

"How will that help me make friends?" Mark asked as they entered the great hall for breakfast.

"Because somebody else is bound to be interested in the same things and there you go." Harry smiled at him. "Or if nothing else your dorm

mates will come to you for advice and help with the subject. Let's get some breakfast I'm starved."

"You want me to sit with you?" Mark's voice squeaked.

Harry gave the boy a push down on the bench. "It's not like I'm asking you on a date or anything but yes, you can sit with me you prat." Harry growled. "Not all the time but now is okay."

"Thanks Harry." Mark said after they had piled their plates with bacon and eggs. "I feel better than I did this morning."

"I thought you looked a little homesick." Harry nodded. "Never had that problem myself."

Mark snorted. "Don't blame you there. Dudley is bad enough. His old man is just as bad. I ran across his front garden one time and he yelled at me like I'd ripped up every blade of grass."

Ron and Hermione joined them. They greeted Mark warmly but kept giving Harry furtive glances. When they finished eating Harry noticed, Mark's dorm mates were staring enviously at him. Loud enough for the other boys to hear Harry clapped Mark on the back and said.

"I've got some homework to do. I'll see you next Sunday on the quidditch field okay?" Mark beamed and nodded his thanks. Before Harry reached the doors to the great hall the other first years were all over Mark plying him with questions.

"That was very nice of you Harry." Hermione said as the three went back to Gryffindor tower. "I knew he was having problems but I didn't know how to help him."

"What's up?" Harry asked. "You two kept looking at me funny all breakfast."

"It's Ginny." Hermione sighed stopping at the portrait of the fat lady. "She's really confused and I think she just needs to talk to you."

“Why?” Harry looked at Ron then back to Hermione as they exchanged looks. “Quit doing that. Just tell me will you?” He frowned. “You’re driving me crazy.”

“Harry it isn’t that easy.” Hermione sighed. “Because we don’t know how you feel about Ginny.”

“How I feel about Ginny?” Harry felt warmth in his face and rolled his eyes. “Hermione, I don’t want to be pushed into asking her to the dance.”

“I’m not trying to push you Harry. It’s just no one has asked her to go to the dance because of what happened in Hogsmeade. And now with you saving her again...” Hermione told him. “I doubt any one will.” She finished.

“Look Ginny’s my friend and I care about her.” Harry gave Ron a glare when he snorted. “But I really don’t think she thinks of me as anything more than a friend. Remember she gave up on me months ago. That’s what you said Hermione.” Harry knew he had started ranting but didn’t care. “So let’s not try to stir anything up okay?” He gave the password to the fat lady and scrambled through the hole into the common room.

Harry went up to get his homework and found an empty table in a corner of the common room. Burying his nose in the charms book Harry ignored Ron and Hermione for the rest of the afternoon. But he couldn’t help notice Ginny. She sat with a group of fifth years talking and laughing. Like she really needed to talk to him. Harry thought sullenly.

He went up to bed early that evening, mainly because Ron and Hermione kept moving closer and closer together. Before Harry went to sleep he tried to clear his head of emotion and thoughts but he found it very difficult. His mind kept drifting back to Ginny. How did he feel about her? He sighed. She was so different than the first year little girl infatuated by the famous Harry Potter. Instead of clearing, his mind filled with images of the red head girl, brown eyes flashing in anger, a sly mischievous smile and the warm concerned look she had given him last year when he had wanted to talk to Sirius.

If Harry was honest with himself, he had to admit he was attracted to Ginny. But it also worried him. What right did he have to drag her closer to Voldemort? A voice in the back of his head answered. She's already been a target and it wasn't your doing. Harry closed his eyes and began to doze.

His worst nightmare visited him that night. The graveyard surrounded him as Voldemort rose from the steaming cauldron. Harry shook as the red eyes bore into his and he looked away. Cedric's dead body lay on the ground a few feet from him. But wait, it wasn't Cedric. This body had beautiful red hair. A horror filled Harry no, not Ginny! "NO!"

Sitting up in bed Harry looked wildly around him, his heart pounding frantically. Harry put his face in his hands. How many times had he woken up like this? Shaking and scared for someone he cared about. Wiping his face on his sheets Harry reached for his glasses then slipped out of bed. He went to the window and poured a glass of water. His hand still shook when he sipped the water slowly. When he finished the glass he crawled reluctantly back into bed.

Once again Harry heard muttering in the corridors as he went to class. And even though this whispering was for the most part in good spirits by the end of Tuesday classes Harry had gotten tired of everybody knowing he was a phoenix animagus. To top it off McGonagall had told him Snape would give him occlumency that evening.

So Harry arrived at the potion master's office not feeling as calm as he would have liked. He knocked on the door and entered. There Snape was, standing behind his desk, dragging memories out of his greasy head and putting them into Dumbledore's pensive.

"Are you ready Potter?" Snape sneered with no preamble.

"Yes, Professor" Harry had forgotten how much he hated Snape. But he forced the feelings from his mind and braced his mind.

“Legilimens.” Snape murmur then he yelped in pain and dropped his wand. Rubbing his arm where a welt appeared he bent to pick up his wand. “You have practiced Potter.” He eyed Harry and raised his wand again. “Legilimens.”

Harry ignored the professor’s mind pushing into his even though his scar started prickling again. He deflected the intrusion as easily as he had done the first. The difference between Snape’s method and Dumbledore’s was like night and day. Harry wasn’t sure which one presented a more intense incursion on his mind. Snape used much more force but the gentleness of Dumbledore’s mind could lure one into a false sense of security before he knew it. But both approaches made his scar burn. By the end of the hour Harry was on his knees before managing to push Snape away.

“I am impressed Potter.” Snape said silkily leaning against the desk. He didn’t offer to help Harry up but left him panting on the floor from the pain, his hands holding his head. “But don’t you wonder,” Snape paused for affect. “If you had put this much effort into occlumency last year your dear godfather would still be alive.”

“YOU BASTARD.” Harry’s head snapped up, his eyes watering with pain and fury. He struggled to his feet but got tangled in the chair and fell hard on the cold stone floor. There was nothing for it, Harry had to wait for the pain to recede before he could get up and leave. He put his head in his hands again not wanting Snape to see any sign of his grief. To Harry’s surprise Snape didn’t yell at him for calling him a name.

“Tell me Potter why did you ask for me to teach you occlumency?” Snape voice was as mocking as ever.

“Because I didn’t want the Headmaster to teach me.” Harry spat back.

“Manners Potter. Yes, I’ve heard about this ridiculous power struggle between you and the Headmaster. Very foolish, even for you Potter.” Snape smirked then knelt beside Harry but not close enough to touch him. “I’ll tell you why. You picked me because I

know how the Dark Lord will try to invade your mind. The Dark Lord will not do it with kindness, like our dear Headmaster. No, he will use every weakness he can find to break into that thick head of yours.” Snape stood up. “Get out Potter. Oh, and ten points from Gryffindor for calling me a bastard and be grateful it isn’t more.”

With every step up to Gryffindor tower Harry regretted agreeing to lessons with Snape. Trying to calm his mind, Harry changed into a phoenix and flew slowly up the staircases. The pain had vanished when he returned to his human form. He gave the fat lady the password and the painting swung forward.

In the common room Ron and Hermione sat close together again. Harry sighed wistfully. Except for classes and quidditch he hadn’t spent much time with either of them, alone or together.

“Harry!” Hermione turned when she heard him trying to make his way quietly to the boys’ stairway. “Oh dear, you don’t have to tell me how occlumency was. I can see it on your face.”

“Took you through the ringer again eh?” Ron growled and moved over closer to Hermione so Harry could sit down.

“Yeah, something like that.” Harry sank into the seat beside Ron. “I know this is supposed to help me block Voldemort but it sure feels to me like it makes me weaker instead of stronger against him.”

“I wish there was something we could do for you.” Hermione said sadly.

“Thanks Hermione. I was going to try to finish the transfiguration essay but I think I’ll go to bed.” Harry stood up and swayed a little.

“Come on mate, I’ll tuck you in.” Ron grabbed Harry’s arm and helped him up the spiral staircase. Without his help Harry doubted if he could have made it up to the dorm.

"Thanks Ron." Harry pulled off his robes and pulled on his pajamas. He noticed Ron shifting back and forth on his feet. "What's up?" He pulled back the covers on his bed and slipped under the sheets.

"Harry, I'm in big trouble." Ron sank on to the end of Harry's bed, looking like the end of the world had been announced.

"Why? What's wrong?" Harry leaned forward a little alarmed.

"Everything!" Ron whispered. "Hermione..."

Harry's eyes popped open. "You haven't...you haven't...She isn't..." He sputtered but couldn't say the words.

Ron stared at him for a moment confused then his ears went red. "NO! NO! Really Harry, how could you think..."

"Then what?" Harry sat back, waiting.

"Hermione wants me to go to her house for the Christmas Holiday." Ron moaned.

"So?" Harry couldn't understand Ron's problem.

"Harry, I've never stayed in a muggle house." Ron whispered as if it was a secret.

Laughing Harry shoved Ron off his bed. "You're as bad as Malfoy, you Pureblood."

"What do you mean by that?" Ron got up angrily. "I don't hate muggle-borns."

"No, but you act like being a muggle is the worst thing in the world sometimes." Harry wagged his finger at him. "I know your contact with muggles have been limited to my relatives but not all muggles are like the Dursleys."

"But what will I do? What will we talk about?" Ron seemed to be hyperventilating. "What if they don't like me?" He threw himself

across the foot of Harry's bed and buried his head in the bedspread. "What if I do or say something really stupid and her folks end up hating me." His muffled voice came through the covering.

Fighting hard to keep from laughing, Harry patted Ron on the back. "They won't hate you. And Hermione will help you fit in. Actually I think you'll end liking a muggle house." Harry couldn't keep a snort from escaping. "Maybe you'll end up like your dad, collecting muggle stuff."

Ron looked up from the bed with a revolted expression. "You have a mean streak in you, Harry. A real nasty streak, I'm telling you." He sat up still looking depressed. "I'm thinking of making some sort of excuse not to go."

"Big mistake. I'm telling you that." Harry warned realizing this wasn't funny to Ron. "Look Ron if you really care about Hermione, you'll go see her world." He told him without a trace of a smile.

"I know." Ron sighed. "I'm really scared though. I think I'd rather face a blast-ended skrewt."

"I've got an idea." Harry said brightly. "From the television shows I've seen. Never mind what television is, you'll see that at Hermione's. But what I learned is the way to a girl is through her parents. So if you offer to help a lot, say with cooking, it will impress them."

"But I've never even cooked magically. How am I supposed to help the muggle way." Ron said skeptical.

"Well, you are in luck, I've done a lot of muggle cooking." Harry said. "Saturday, we'll go down to the kitchens and I'll show you some simple things." He was rewarded with a hopeful look from Ron.

"That would be great Harry. I'd really appreciate any edge." Ron said relieved. "I'll let you get some sleep. Thanks again, Harry." He slid off Harry's bed.

"Sorry I laughed at you," Harry said yawning.

"That's okay. I suppose I am acting a bit pathetic. Goodnight Harry, I'll be up in a bit." Ron left the dorm.

When he came up later Harry was fast asleep, dreaming of the graveyard again. Voldemort's wand connected with his and the golden web formed around them. People started emerging from the dark wizard's wand. But this time it wasn't Cedric asking Harry to return his body to his parents nor Harry's parents but Hermione, Ron and Ginny.

Once more Harry awoke in a cold sweat. As much as he hated reliving Voldemort's return Harry would rather have it the way it really happened, having his friends show up there made it a hundred times worse. After his mind calmed and his breathing returned to normal, Harry got out of bed and grabbed his school bag. If he wasn't going to sleep he might as well get some work done.

"Ginny?" Harry was surprised to see her sitting by the dieing fire working on some paper. Cleo lay across her lap.

"Oh, Harry, you scared me." Ginny had jumped when he had spoken her name. "What are you doing up?"

"Couldn't sleep." Harry shrugged taking the seat opposite her. "Thought I'd get some work done."

"Me too." She held up her potions book.

"Ah, OWL year." Harry sympathized. He took out his transfiguration essay, quill and inkbottle. Thinking about the topic, Harry began to write. After completing a scroll Harry glanced at Ginny when he reached in his bag for another roll of parchment. Just from the hunch of her shoulders and half glazed eyes, Harry knew she wasn't really reading. There was something familiar about that look.

"Did you still have nightmares?" Harry asked gently.

Ginny shook herself and sighed. "Not very often. The first summer I had horrible dreams." She shuddered.

"I never knew." Harry said softly. "I should have guessed though."

"I don't know how I had gotten through it with out my family. Fred and George would come in when they heard me and wake me up. They'd always end up making me laugh." Ginny smiled then met Harry's eyes. "You never had anyone to wake you. I don't know how you stood it."

"When I'm here, Ron wakes me when he hears me." Harry assured her.

"Yeah you could light one of Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous Wet Start, No Heat Fireworks under Ron when he's sleeping and still not wake him." Ginny snorted.

Harry laughed. "Did you Hermione tell you she invited Ron to her house for the Holidays?"

"Oh she did asked him then. I knew she was planning to. Did he freak?" Ginny grinned.

"The way Ron went on before he told me I thought Hermione was, well." Harry blushed a little. "You know."

Ginny giggled. "Oh gawd. That's so funny."

How he loved to see her laugh Harry thought. Then Harry smiled at her and took a deep breath. "Ginny, would you go to the dance with me." Now that wasn't so hard Harry thought. But the smile had vanished from Ginny's face.

"I don't know Harry." She sighed. "Don't feel obligated to ask me."

"I don't feel obligated to ask you." Harry frowned. "I made a point of waiting until Ron and Hermione stopped pushing to say anything."

“Didn’t Parvati ask you? I saw her talking to you yesterday.” Ginny dropped her gaze and fingered the edge of her book. “I heard she was going to ask you if you didn’t ask her.”

“No she didn’t ask me.” Harry shuddered. “Now I’m begging you. Please go with me to the dance.”

“You don’t want to go with her?” Ginny looked up unconvinced.

“Parvati is nice but if I had to smell that perfume all evening long I think I’d gag. It would be like dating Trelawney.” Harry told her.

Ginny smiled a little at the image but still resisted. “Things are so confusing for me right now.”

“What things?” Harry didn’t understand the reference. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t know if I can explain. I don’t know if I really understand.” Ginny shrugged. “You don’t want to go with a basket case like me.”

Harry gazed at her for a long moment. “I did save your life three times.” Harry tried a different tactic. “You should at least save me from Parvati.”

“You would hold that up to me?” Ginny’s eyes flashed with sudden anger. “I can’t believe you said that.”

“Well, since my natural charm and sympathy didn’t work I thought I’d try a little guilt and see how that went.” Harry grinned as Ginny’s mouth dropped open. She burst out laughing.

Wiping tears of mirth from her eyes Ginny gave him a shy smile. “You really me want to go with you? Ron’s little sister?”

“I do recall this summer noticing you weren’t a little girl anymore.” Harry smiled back.

Blushing Ginny tried not to beam too much. “Okay, I’ll go with you.”

“Great! I wanted to ask before the robe places visited, just in case you needed knew dress robes. I know I do.” Harry settled back in his seat feeling he was still grinning like a fool but he didn’t care. They both returned to their homework, not know what else to say to each other.

“Harry?” Ginny soft voice broke the awkward silence.

“Yeah?” Harry glanced up from his parchment to see her worried face.

“Is this just two friends going to the dance or is this a date?” Ginny watched his eyes.

Harry answered quickly. “It’s a date.” He leaned closer to her, gazing into her surprised brown eyes. “And all the benefits and perks of a date.”

“What do you mean?” Ginny asked intrigued.

Harry turned toward her ear and whispered. “It means if the opportunity arises, I get to kiss you, Miss Weasley.”

Author notes: Thanks for the reviews!

I know my story would probably be better with a beta reader but I just don’t have time for it. So you’ll just have to put up with the bad grammar and spelling. The spelling is probably for the most part typos. I did find two words that I thought I knew but when I started writing I started doubting my use and I had to look it up. Passed and Past I hope I got them in right.

So, what’s next? Maybe the trunk? What is in that trunk? When’s the full moon?

It’s a damn poor mind that can only think of one way to spell a word:
Andrew Jackson

Chapter 24

By the size of Hermione's smile Wednesday morning, when Harry entered the common room he knew Ginny had told her he had asked her to the dance. Ron alternated between giving him approving nods and apprehensive scrutinizing looks.

"Did you see the notice the robe shops are going to be here today and tomorrow?" Hermione told Harry as they went to classes.

"No, I didn't. I'm glad you told me." Harry said. "I'll go see what they have this afternoon."

After a grueling Defense Against the Dark Arts class, which included Ron getting sent to the Hospital wing to have his left ear reattached, Harry headed to the unused classrooms where the robe stores had set up shop.

As he browsed through the different colors of robes Harry felt someone touch his shoulder. Parvati Patil stood smiling at him when he turned around.

"Hi Harry." Parvati said breathlessly.

"Uh, hi." Harry said stepping back away from her heavy perfume.

"Have you asked anyone to the dance yet?" Parvati looked hopeful.

"Uh, yes, I asked Ginny." Harry was glad looks couldn't kill because Parvati gave him daggers.

"Oh." Parvati pouted then looked off across the room. "Oh, there's Lavender she wanted me to help her pick out new dress robes. See you."

"Bye." Harry tried not to laugh but was doubly glad Ginny had agreed to go with him to the dance.

"May I help you dear?" Madam Malkin asked at his elbow.

“Yes, please. I’m not sure what color to get. My green dress robes need replaced.” Harry told her.

“Let me see.” Madam Malkin studied Harry and eyed him up and down. “Gryffindor?” She stated rather than asked and Harry nodded. “You know. I think I have the perfect dress robe for you. Come with me.” She headed for the back of the room, which Harry noticed as he followed had been magically enhanced with all the necessary racks and fitting cubicles. Madam Malkin entered a storage area and closed the door. She flipped through several robes hanging on a rack. “Where is it? A few students have tried it on but it just wasn’t right for them. Ah, here it is.” She pulled a robe of gleaming scarlet out.

“I don’t know. That looks a bit too grand for me.” Harry hesitated. He did like the color though.

“Why don’t you try it on and see.” Madam Malkin pushed it into his hands. “It won’t hurt to try it on.”

“I guess not.” Harry went into the cubicle in the small room and took off his Hogwarts robes. The scarlet robe shimmered as he did up the embroidered gold trimmed front. Harry stepped out of the changing room and looked around for a mirror.

Madam Malkin clapped her hands. “You look magnificent. That’s perfect for you.” She guided him over to a mirror. “Just look.”

When Harry peered into the mirror he was surprised to see he did look good. The black Hogwarts robes always made him look harsh and pale. But the rich scarlet brought out color in his face and gave his complexion a softer and warmer glow. The robe fit his thin frame giving him a sleek polished appearance. Turning a bit to the left he lifted his arms, the material hung like wings. Harry smiled as he thought of his phoenix form. Then Harry turned so he could see the back and saw the pleat in the back had gold material, like a phoenix’s tail.

“Are you sure this isn’t too much for just a dance?” Harry asked still examining his image.

“Oh no dear. Now if it was next term I’d say yes, but since it is coming Christmas and all, you’ll need something a bit more festive.” Madam Malkin smoothed his shoulder and tugged at the sleeve. “I don’t think it need much altering either. It looks as if it was made just for you.”

“Okay, I’ll take it. But maybe I should find something toned down a bit, just in case I don’t have the nerve to wear this.” Harry grinned. In a short time he settled on a metallic maroon robe that was so dark it was almost black. As Madam Malkin boxed his new robes Harry asked. “Has Ginny Weasley been in yet?”

“Ah yes, Miss Weasley. Fine family. She was in and did a little browsing.” The seamstress smiled.

“When Ginny comes back, if she finds something she likes but isn’t in her price range, could you make it affordable for her? I’ll make up the difference.” Harry requested.

“Of course I can. How nice of you.” Madam Malkin beamed at him. “A real gentleman, so few exists these days.” She thanked him and Harry left carrying his purchases up to Gryffindor tower.

For the next few days all the talk in the castle consisted of new robes and the dance. Ginny and Harry agreed not to show each other their new robes until the day of the dance. Harry had even refused to show Ron and Hermione.

Harry endured occlumency with Snape, over the next couple weeks. Each session made Harry feel like the entire student body had trampled him. The strain almost made Harry forget about Legilimency, which he finally remembered to bring up to McGonagall one afternoon after animagus training.

“Ah, yes,” McGonagall shifted her papers around. “Professor Snape refused that request. I will bring it up with the Headmaster if you still wish to continue it.”

“Yes, I do.” Harry wondered why she was being evasive. “It was part of the deal.” He reminded her.

"I'll speak to Professor Dumbledore about it then." McGonagall said.

"Thanks." Harry left the transfiguration classroom. After he had eaten dinner Harry waited until the last moment to go to occlumency, which caused him to arrive ten minutes late.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for being late Potter." Snape snapped the moment Harry opened the door. Harry glared at Snape but didn't reply.

"Get ready." Snape said and drew his wand out. Hurriedly Harry took his wand from his robes. "Legilimens." Snape cried.

With force stronger than he had ever use Snape pressed into Harry's mind. Harry braced for the on coming struggle. Pain shot through his forehead but he shoved Snape away. Not waiting for Harry to recover, the potion master attacked again. Struggling with the pain as well as the invasion on his mind, Harry couldn't see the classroom any more. Eyes closed against the agony Harry, once again was on the cold stone floor panting when Snape finally relented.

"Not bad Potter." Snape grudgingly admitted.

"Why does it hurt so much?" Harry gasped. "I saw Cedric. The curse that killed him didn't hurt. He just looked surprised." He grabbed on to the chair and pulled himself into it. "Why is there so much pain from this curse that failed? Even occlumency with the headmaster caused the pain."

Snape eyed Harry for a moment. "I don't know Potter. The Headmaster and I have discussed the matter and have yet to produce a solution."

"Professor, would you mind if I changed into my animagus form before we continue? I can get rid of the pain." Harry asked holding on to his head as if it would explode if he let go.

"Be quick about it, Potter." Snape said stiffly.

Gritting his teeth from the pain Harry calmed his mind enough to let his phoenix out. He sighed with relief as the pain disappeared. An instant later he returned to his human shape.

“Shall we get on with it?” Snape asked indifferent to Harry’s discomfort.

With all his extra activities, occlumency, quidditch, teaching Ron some basic cooking on Saturday and flying every Sunday with Mark Evans, Harry almost forgot about his mother’s trunk and November’s full moon. And when Harry did think about the chest, no rush of insight came to him as to how to open the box.

Nor did Hermione Ron or Ginny have any different ideas to try the Monday evening they stayed up for the full moon. Two hours had ticked slowly away with Harry trying every combination of the words he could think of. Every one of them was yawning wide.

“I can’t keep my eyes open any longer Harry.” Hermione finally said. “We’re just going to have to leave it until next month.” Ginny and Ron agreed.

“I think I’ll stay up for few more minutes.” Harry said as the three rose. “I won’t be long.”

“Good night, Harry. Don’t forget tomorrow we have classes.” Hermione reminded him as she started up the stairs. Ron and Ginny bid him good night and went to bed.

After they left, over and over Harry repeated the poem to open the trunk.

“One to unlock might

With blood in sight

On Moony’s night

The words said right

And a summoned light.”

On Moony’s night, Harry considered. If Remus and his mother had been friends, maybe this meant she didn’t want him to see what was in the trunk. Harry blinked. And with Remus changing into a werewolf wouldn’t it seem likely Prongs and Padfoot were with him? So what was so serious that Lily Potter didn’t even want her husband and her husband’s best friends to look into after the trunk was closed? Something she alone contrived. This thought caused Harry to sit up straight. Alone? One to unlock might! One person! His heart pounded and he swallowed hard. Quickly Harry grabbed the chest and moved it into the fast fading moonlight. In parseltongue Harry said. “Hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil.”

A beam of moonlight glowed on the keyhole and right next to the plate a small hole could be seen, a wand tip size hole. His hand shaking Harry put the tip of his wand in the whole and then muttered. “Lumos.” There was a click and the lid creaked open. A light mist obscured the contents for a moment then Harry peered inside.

On top an assortment of baby things could be seen. Blue booties and a black lock of hair tied with a blue ribbon. A photo album, Harry carefully took the book out and opened it up. His baby pictures, page after page of him, from birth until, from the looks of it, to just before his parents went into hiding. Setting the album aside Harry saw several videotapes and video camera with a note attached.

“Protected and charmed to work in and near magical houses. But don’t expect it to work at Hogwarts. Way to much magic around there for these charms.

Lily”

Confused more than ever, Harry continued to extract baby things from the trunk. Why on earth did his mother put such a powerful spell on a trunk with his baby stuff in it? At the bottom of this first shelf, underneath a baby blanket was a letter tied with a red ribbon.

Carefully Harry pulled the ribbon to untie it. The letter unfolded it self and began to speak in his mother's voice.

"Dear Harry,

My son, how do I begin to explain this chest? I don't know if I can but here goes. For reasons probably known to you now, your father and I will have to go into hiding soon. And I have to help you in ways that the other wizards and witches may not...well... actually will not approve.

Since you have opened this trunk you know the way but perhaps not the exact reasoning. Only a person of my descent alone and speaking the words in parseltongue on the full moon could open this trunk.

For years I had kept hidden that I am a parselmouth. I could talk to snakes before I even knew I was a witch. After entering Hogwarts I learned quickly the wizarding world looks down on those with such abilities so I kept quiet about it. I never even had the nerve to tell James.

Below you will find items of dark magic. I do not practice the dark arts but I do recognize the desperate situation of a war against a dark wizard. You will not win without some knowledge of such things and the sooner you learn the better. As the saying goes, sometimes you have to fight fire with fire.

Tell few people about these things and only those who you know to be true friends. I hope there is someone who you can turn to help you. The only person I can think of, who would know anything about these items would be Severus Snape. Professor Dumbledore trusts him. Many, including your father and Sirius do not. I'm not sure. So I'll leave that up to you.

Now I must finish packing this trunk and send it off to my sister.

All my love

Mom."

To Harry's relief the letter did not burst into flames like a howler. He picked up the parchment and reread it. He set it aside and carefully took all the baby things out of the trunk. There was a finger hole to lift in the shelf. Harry tugged it up and beneath the bottom were five books. One by one Harry read the titles; The Darkness Within by Reginald Black, Spells to Darkness by Albert Weasley, Dark above Light by Sigeric Snape and the Power of the Shadow by Sigeric Snape. The last book was tattered and looked like it would fall apart. Gently he lifted the palm size book out and turned it over to see the cover but there was no title on the crumbling brown front. As carefully as he could Harry opened the cover. The brittle paper flaked off. The title page bore the words, Power over Dark by Salazar Slytherin. Harry gasped and almost dropped the disintegrating book.

How did his mother find a book by Salazar Slytherin? It alone must have cost a fortune. Who would part with such a book? He turned another page and read a short ways. The reading was difficult for it was all hand written with many loops and scrolls to letters and words that time had changed spelling and definition. Harry yawned and set the book aside. He was too tired to read but in no mood to go to bed. Below the books another board could be removed. Harry pried it up and found a bundle wrapped in soft leather. Beside the package was a large egg shaped container, which Harry could see was hinge in the middle. Picking up the bundle Harry laid it in his lap and unfolded the layers of leather. Peeling off the last bit he turned the item over.

A small intricately detailed wooden shield made of several different woods softly reflected the moonlight. Very life-like on the three crests at the top were snakeheads each facing a different direction. Curving gracefully, the snake necks joined at one point into one body tightly coil at the center of the shield. Hesitantly Harry touched the detailed scales and felt the smooth finish. It almost felt like a snakeskin. Just from his tentative touch, Harry knew this shield held very powerful magic. It made his skin prickle when he slipped his arm into the two leather straps in the back. He stood up to see his reflection in the night window.

What Harry saw almost made him throw the shield to the ground. The snakeheads turned flicking their forked tongues and stared at

him with fiery red eyes. Harry pulled the shield off and set it by the trunk. The snakeheads were quite still now.

Feeling very unsettled by the shield Harry reached in the trunk to picked up the large egg. This was what made the trunk heavy. With difficulty he wrestled it out of the chest and set it on the floor beside the chest. Taking his wand Harry tapped the egg. "Alohomora." With a loud hiss the egg sprang open.

From deep within a voice whispered. "Who awakens the Shield of the Runespoor?"

"Uh, Me, Harry Potter." Harry answered unknowingly in parseltongue.

"He speaks." A second voice hissed dreamily. "He speaks to us."

"Does he bring milk and honey to us?" A third voice spat. "We are hungry. Very much so." A slithering could be heard from the egg and a large orange snakehead appeared over the side, followed by two more. One hissed and bared its fangs at Harry.

"Calm down." Harry told it. "I'll get you something to eat. You said milk and honey?" He circled his wand and a bowl full of milk appeared. Then he conjured a bottle of honey.

"The milk and honey are to be as one, thou art dim-witted manling." The snake on the right hissed flicking its tongue.

"Hsssss. He is the master of the shield now, thou must obey him." The second voice said.

"I can't conjure things together like that yet." Harry added the honey to the milk. "Tell me when to stop." The snakes slithered out farther to watch and he almost dropped the honey container into the milk. The three snakeheads, which were followed by three long slender necks, were attached to a single body like the image on the shield. The thickness of his thigh the snake slowly withdrew its great length from the egg. The head on the right flicked its tongue into the milk.

“Moresssss.” Said the vividly orange head. Contrasting black stripes down the scaly back gave the creature a striking appearance. “Sssstopsss.” It finally said after Harry had emptied the entire contents of honey into the milk.

Racking his brain Harry remembered something of such a creature in his textbook, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. “You are a Runespoor?” He asked.

The head on the left turned from sipping the milk and honey. “Yesss, oh master of the shield.”

“What is this shield?” Harry glanced at it but kept a close eye on the runespoor.

“Young master, doest thou not know?” The head in the middle seemed to pause in mid thought so the head on the left took over.

“The Runespoor Shield is an ancient device of great power, oh master.” The snake paused to drink more of the honey milk.

“Older than anything thou can imagine.” The center head added.

“But not as old as us. Oh, no.” The left snakehead assured him.

“Do you have names? What do I call you?” Harry wondering as the snake talked what gender he should call them. There was a definite feminine quality in their speech.

“I am Hapa the planner. I choose where to go.” The snakehead to the left said.

“I am Kesho the dreamer. I think of wonderful magnificent things to do.” The middle head said.

“Hiissss. I am Giza the critic. I tell the others what they are doing wrong.” The snakehead to the right had lifted from drinking. “A tireless and thankless occupation. Hisss”

“Pleased to meet you.” Harry said politely.

“Ah a courteous tongue is a great weapon, young master.” Hapa told him.

“Meat? Thou has meat and thou wouldst feed us this swill?” Giza hissed snapping her fangs.

“No, I don’t have any meat. But I suppose I can get you some. What do you eat?” Harry leaned back away from the angry head.

“Ratssss. Big fat Ratssss. Not those stringy cold things the crimson she-man gave us before she sealed the egg.” Giza flicked her tongue in disgust.

“Crimson she-man?” Harry puzzled. “Oh you must mean my mother.”

“Yesss, She was our mistress for a short time.” Hapa said.

“Most unique witch, extraordinarily so.” Kesho said dreamily.

“Short sighted she was.” Hissed Giza. “Never said how long we were to be imprisoned. With naught but cold rats to eat.”

“Don’t worry I’ll get you some rats.” Harry assured them then thought. “You said you have to obey me?” He asked.

“Yesss, Master of the Runespoor Shield.” The three heads chorused.

“Good. This is an order, no biting. I don’t know if any of you are venomous but I don’t want anyone to get hurt.” Harry said sternly.

“Hissss. My fangs carry death.” Giza said proudly. “But we need to eat. How do we hunt if we cannot bite?”

“I’ll see you get fed. But remember no biting. Understood?” Harry repeated firmly.

“We will obey thee master.” The three said in unison.

“Right.” Harry said. “So what about this shield?”

“The Shield of Runespoor was created many centuries ago, long before the days men and wizards mixed their blood. When more sons of men spoke with all creatures.” Hapa said.

“Those were the days.” Kesho said lazily. “We were greatly honored by man and wizards. But since man has become ignorant the fear is greater than the wisdom.”

“Lidless eyes are fearless.” Giza interjected.

Harry could see this was going to be hard to sort out with the three snakeheads interrupting each other. “Why don’t you tell me the story, Hapa? I do need to get some sleep tonight.”

“SssCertainly. Burkina Faso is where we left our shell. Before the great men wars, when wizard kind was greater and more powerful than all others. When we were the size of your finger,” The Hapa touched Harry’s index finger with a flick of her tongue. “A sorcerer called Tavek found us one day basking in the sun. Nothing bothered us for we knew little of the world outside our forest. Tavek brought us sweet mice and news of wars in places of little concern to us. Then one day many years later and we were as thick as a sapling and he was an old man, Tavek asked us to guard something for him. We could hardly refuse. A great friendship had grown between us. Thus he put a spell on us binding us to the shield forever.”

“Many long years past, we guarded the treasure, Giza teaching death to all who could not speak our tongue. And the more time past the more our speech was forgotten. Then a wizard finally arrived knowing our speech with milk and honey in a bowl. Long had it been since we talked to men. Names of old were no more. New places and names speckled his words.”

“His name wouldn’t have been Slytherin? Would it?” Harry wondered.

“Salazar Slytherin? We have heard of the wizard. But no part did we play in that game. This wizard lived long before the Hogwarts Four. He needed the shield for a war against an evil sorceress. It was

ordained in the spell for us to help those who could talk our talk, so we allowed him to take thy shield.” Hapa said.

“But what does the shield do?” Harry wondered if he would ever get a straight answer from the serpent.

“Sssaves thee from magic, master. Only one magic it cannot stop.” Hapa told him.

“Let me guess. Avada Kedavra?” Harry interrupted.

“Yessss, the killing curse no magic can stop it.” Hapa flicked her tongue.

“How did my mother get the shield?” Harry asked not wanting to go into how he had once survived the killing curse.

“Mistress Potter heard tell of us from an acquaintance. How she tracked our trail to where we had been hidden many long years I do not know. She said there was not much time for long speech and she must finish the spells upon the chest before her mate returned.” Hapa said.

“She had great plans for us.” Kesho admired. “We would be there to help her blood defeat an evil wizard.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. Opening the trunk seemed to have brought up more questions than it had answered. Some noise from the dormitories above told Harry the occupants were stirring. “I’ve got to get this stuff out of sight. You stay here. I’ll be back for you.” Carefully wrapping the soft leather around the shield again he laid it back in the trunk with the dark magic books and his baby things. He put the baby blanket over the edge of the chest so the lid wouldn’t close and carried it up to his school trunk and stowed it inside.

Neville stirred and sat up. “Morning Harry. You’re up early.”

“Morning Neville.” Harry nodded. “Had some things to do.” He closed the lid of this trunk and hurried down the spiral stairs. What to do with the runespoor? Harry thought as he gazed at the serpent still

drinking the milk and honey. He heard Giza complaining the milk was cold. There was no way he could keep a snake this size a secret.

"I've got to show you to the head of my house." Harry told them of his decision. "I'm going to pick you up now, alright?" He didn't want to startle the runespoor into snapping.

"Anything for thee master." They hissed.

Picking up the runespoor wasn't easy for it had to be fifteen feet in length and very heavy. He draped it around his neck hoping it wouldn't strangle him and looped its coils in his arms. Awkwardly Harry managed to scramble out of the portrait hole. Luckily there was no one in the halls yet. He was grateful he didn't have to explain the runespoor. Arriving at Professor McGonagall quarters Harry knocked lightly. Getting no answer he rapped harder.

"Come in." McGonagall's sleepy voice answered. Harry managed to turn the handle and push it open as his teacher came out of her bedchamber putting on a dressing gown. She let out a half scream. "Potter! What on earth are you doing?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you Professor. But I managed to open my mother's trunk and this was in it. I thought I better show you." Harry tried not to smile too much at the look on McGonagall's face.

"I should say." She peered closely at the serpent. "My word, a Runespoor! Where on earth did Lily get such a creature? And by the size it must be extremely old." McGonagall jumped back as the Giza hissed at her. "Careful Potter, the one head is quite poisonous."

"Don't worry. I made it promise not to bite anything." Harry told her. "It will be okay for me to keep it won't it? If I tell the guys in my dorm it won't hurt anybody."

McGonagall hesitated. "I don't know Potter. I think the headmaster should see this. I'll just be a moment to get dressed." Harry was glad she was just a moment because the Runespoor was getting very heavy on his shoulders and arms. Then the two hurried through the castle to gargoyle at the entrance to the moving stairs.

"Ice Mice." McGonagall said and the gargoyle jumped aside. They stepped on to the moving stairs. The Runespoor hissed as its tail scrapped the wall and Harry tried to tuck in all its length. They arrived at the top and McGonagall knocked on door to the headmaster's office. It swung open and Harry and the Professor went inside.

Before one word of greeting had been spoken pandemonium broke out. Fawkes the phoenix gave a cry of attack and launched himself at the Runespoor. The three snakeheads hissed and snapped at the bird and Harry tried to protect the Runespoor from Fawkes sharp beak and claws as well as keep the serpent from biting the bird. Hissing and spitting along with cries from McGonagall and a Phoenix tone that wasn't the soothing song one usually heard from Fawkes filled the normally quiet headmaster's office. Finally Harry had pinned all three snakeheads tightly to the floor telling them to behave or he'd put them back in that egg and Dumbledore managed to get Fawkes to settle back on his golden perch by the door.

"Are you all right Harry?" Dumbledore asked. "I've never seen Fawkes behave that way in my office." He stroked the scarlet bird trying to calm the flashing eyes.

"I'm fine. Just some scratches." Harry heaved himself off the floor still holding Giza's head.

"Oh, that explains much." Dumbledore sobered. "Where did you get a Runespoor?"

"My mother's trunk." Harry said then to the serpent. "Stop struggling or I'll let the phoenix peck your eyes out. I've seen him do a basilisk so you'll be nothing to him."

"But master, the phoenix is such an evil beast. Only dark wizards associate with such creatures." Hapa hissed in Harry's ear.

"Funny that's what they say about Runespoor and snakes now." Harry answered back. "Things change so get over it." He looked over to McGonagall and Dumbledore. His transfiguration teacher had

her hand on her mouth in shock. The headmaster regarded him solemnly. "Sorry, I was just telling it to behave. It seems to think phoenixes are dark wizards pets."

"Really Potter. I don't know what to say. It is quite alarming to hear you speak to it." McGonagall said.

"Sit down Harry, he must be heavy." Dumbledore pointed to the chair in front of the desk.

"She, headmaster." Harry sank gratefully into the chair. The Runespoor kept all three heads turned toward the phoenix glaring and flicking their tongues out.

"I have only once seen a Runespoor anywhere near this large." Dumbledore sat down behind his desk studying the creature. A thoughtful expression crossed the old man's face. "Does she remember me?"

Harry looked sharply at the Headmaster then asked the runespoor. Slowly the three heads turned to consider the old wizard. The Hapa swelled hissing "I remember a small barefooted boy slowly following his father." The head swayed as the runespoor spoke. "The sire was angry with the child for using his wand again without permission and sought to punish him by way of a thrashing. He searched the bush for a stick to use. The shield lay hidden in the thicket so Giza spoke to him of death."

Harry's face went pale and he looked up at Dumbledore. "She killed your father?"

The headmaster nodded. "It seems she remembers. It was long ago Harry do not worry yourself over it." Dumbledore waved his hand dismissively.

Harry stared at him in disbelief. "I am sorry sir." He held the headmaster's eyes and knew instantly the death of his father bothered Dumbledore more than he was letting on.

“Was she guarding something?” Dumbledore asked as if he knew. Harry still stared at him.

“Yes, Headmaster.” Harry finally answered. “But I’m not ready to share that information. The Runespoor I knew I couldn’t keep secret.”

“It would have been difficult.” Dumbledore nodded. “If all the students in Gryffindor tower agree, you may keep her in your dorm. If any object we must find other accommodations.”

“I understand.” Harry nodded then yawned.

“Have you been up all night Potter?” McGonagall frowned.

“Well, yes. I found out my mother’s trunk could only be opened at full moon. But I have only two classes this morning. I thought I could catch up on sleep this afternoon. I’ll skip animagus training just this once, if you don’t mind?” Harry said.

“Of course. I will go and inquire if anybody has a problem with the Runespoor. Perhaps you should stay here until I return.” McGonagall glanced at Dumbledore, who nodded. She left his office as the morning light struck the odd instruments on the spindly table Harry had once destroyed.

“How far back does she remember?” Dumbledore asked still scrutinizing the serpent.

“I’m not sure. She speaks of times long before the Hogwarts four, as she calls them.” Harry turned speak to the Runespoor. “Who was it that made the shield?”

“Tavek of Phoenician.” Hapa answered.

“Tavek of Phoenician was the first wizard to speak to her.” Harry relayed.

“I have not heard of that name.” Dumbledore’s eyes almost glowed. “Do you realize the wealth of information contain in your new friend,

Harry? Centuries of past knowledge beyond the binding of books.” Then his enthusiasm seemed to wane and he sighed. “More wisdom than our short lives could ever hope to learn.” They gazed at the Runespoor as it looked back at the phoenix. Then a sharp rap came at the office door and it opened.

“Headmaster, I need to talk to you about...” Snape stopped as the Runespoor hissed. Harry put a hand on Giza’s head and reminded her to be nice. “What the...? A Runespoor? Here?” Snape scowled and looked at Dumbledore.

“A gift from Harry’s mother.” Dumbledore said briefly then his eyes twinkled mischievously. “Weren’t you just saying Severus how you wished you had some Runespoor eggs for some potion you are working on? Perhaps you can make some sort of arrangement with Harry for any she may produce.” Snape went paler than usual and glared at Harry.

Just to irritate him, Harry gave Snape a kind and gentle smile. But the potion master saw the underlying smirk and his eyes narrowed. “I think we could make some sort of deal, Professor. After all I can be just as fair to you as you have always been to me.”

Author Notes: Thanks again for the reviews.

I knew the punishment for Malfoy might seem light to some but Dumbledore never expelled Black for sending Snape to a werewolf. So I thought surely Malfoy would be able to squirm his way out of getting kicked out.

The trunk is open!! Hope nobody is disappointed.

Chapter 25

When Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room with the runespoor the room was packed. Several first years screamed as Giza hissed at the crowd. A path opened for Harry as he tiredly carried the serpent up the spiral staircase.

"You opened it!!! Why didn't you wake me?" Ron stopped short at the three hissing heads. "Blimey Harry. What are you going to do with it?"

"McGonagall said I could keep her here. She can be in the common room as long as nobody is bothered by her." Harry listened to the hissing then spoke back. "Where would I get some rats? She's hungry." He paused to listen to more hissing. "Excuse me she's very hungry."

"Rats?" Ron shrugged thinking then his face brightened. "How about Hagrid? He seems to have a supply of food for just about anything."

"Great idea, Ron." Harry put the runespoor on his bed. "You stay here okay? I'll be back with some food for you. Remember your promise no biting."

"Harry that's freaky to listen to, parseltongue." Ron gulped. "Cool, but freaky. Come on I'll help you bring something back for it. What else was in the chest?"

"I'll tell you when we're alone okay?" Harry whispered as they passed some people in the corridors. "Better that I show you than tell you any way." Harry yawned but kept moving. By the time he and Ron had returned to Gryffindor tower with a bag of rats Hagrid had given him, Harry didn't know if he could climb back down all those stairs again. He was very tempted to change into animagus form and fly to Herbology but he was so tired Harry wasn't sure of his strength to maintain his phoenix. Dragging Harry endured his two morning classes in a haze.

At morning break he filled in Hermione and Ron about the things in the trunk as they stood in the cold windy courtyard. Both stood with their mouth open as he described the books and shield.

"Where on earth would your mother get such books? Let alone the shield." Hermione asked.

"I don't know. And how she managed to do it without my Dad knowing, pretty strange." Harry replied.

"Not so strange. All she'd have to do is wait for the full moon." Ron said turning his back to the wind.

"But she didn't know she was going into hiding, at least I don't think they time to make a lot of plans." Harry shook his head. "I'd say she had one or two months at the most to plan this trunk. And to find and buy what she put in it."

"Where did she get the money? If Salazar Slytherin really did write that old book, it would be absolutely priceless. It should be in the Hogwarts Archives." Hermione hands twitched like she wanted to get her hands on the book.

"I'll let you slog through it Hermione. It's not light reading by any means." Harry yawned loudly. "I'm sorry I've got to get some sleep. Wake me for dinner? And I still have occlumency with Snape this evening." Harry trudge back up to Gryffindor tower like his legs were made of lead. Trying to convince the runespoor to give him room to get into bed was another trial.

"This isn't your bed. It's my bed. I just put you to keep you out of the way." Harry tugged at the covers and managed to pull them down far enough to slip between them. "You can sleep at the foot as long as you keep quiet."

"Sleep at thy foot?" Giza hissed angrily "We are not thy lap dog to sit at thy feet."

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that." Harry assured her yawning. "I'll find you something to sleep on this weekend. But right now I just have to get some sleep. So be quiet." He heard some unintelligible hissing but then silence filled the room. Harry sighed and his eyes closed on their own accord. Strange dreams filled his head as Harry slept the

afternoon away. Many filled with snakes and dark magical books that spoke to him in a language he didn't understand. Voldemort had been oddly silent and only a vague tinges of feelings seeped through to Harry.

For once Harry was actually looking forward to occlumency as he paused outside of Snape's office door. He knocked then entered. A cold gaze from Snape greeted him from behind the desk and Harry stared back benignly. The scowl on Snape's face deepened.

"Okay Potter, let's get this over with." Snape said in what he obviously thought was a civil voice. "What do you want for the runespoor's eggs?"

"I haven't really thought about it, Professor. I only just got the runespoor." Harry continued to keep any smirk or contempt out of his face.

"Oh, come Potter. You must have some idea of what you want. Name it or we'll forget the whole thing." Snape countered.

"Okay, let's just forget it, Professor." Harry shrugged. "I'm sure Mundungus Fletcher can find a use for them. Or Fred and George Weasley maybe could use them in one of their products."

"You wouldn't?" Snape lost all control and bolted to his feet. If Harry had been younger he would have felt threaten but it took all he had not to laugh in Snape's face at his feeble attempt of intimidation. Evidently Snape saw his ploy hadn't worked and sat back down. "You would wouldn't you?"

"In a heart beat Professor." Harry nodded still without contempt. "I can let you know by next week what an egg is worth to me."

"An egg?" Snape grimaced as he realized the price wouldn't be for all the eggs the runespoor produced. Taking a deep breath the potion

master spat. "Fine. Let me know. Now we have occlumency. Get ready."

There had been a fleeting moment when Harry thought the professor would go easier on him to get the coveted eggs but he should have known better. Harry quickly pulled his wand out and braced himself. Snape's attack on his mind was relentless. Mind battered Harry finally left the office an hour later. Quickly changing into his phoenix form to fly the staircases instead of climb them.

Later that evening Harry introduced the runespoor to Hermione and Ginny. Then Harry showed them the all the things in the trunk while the other dorm occupants were in the common room studying.

"What's this?" Ginny asked, picking up videotape. "It looks like a book but I can't open it."

"I'm hoping I can show you in Grimmauld Place. It's a recording. I'm assuming of my parents." Harry said eagerly.

"I don't know what that means but I hope it works too." Ginny gave him a confused grin.

Hermione was reverently looking over the books. "You're right Harry. I can't understand half of what is written in Slytherin's book." She shook her head. "I don't know how you'll be able to translate it. Which brings up the question; why did your mom include this book when it's so hard to read."

"Maybe she meant for Harry to get help from someone who could read it." Ginny suggested looking up from the photo album.

"But who?" Hermione and Harry said together. They laughed and all them shrugged.

Reluctantly Ron had picked up the Spells to Darkness by Albert Weasley book. "I wonder if this guy is related to us?" He said to

Ginny and opened the book and browsed through it. "I sure hope if he is, he's a very distant relation." Ron said softly, giving a slight shudder.

"There's little doubt the book by that Black is related to Sirius and the two authored by Snape. We all know what side he started on." Harry glanced through The Darkness Within by Reginald Black and rubbed his forehead then ran his hand through his hair. "I'm sort of torn. I want to read them but I feel weird, almost tainted just touching these books."

"I hear you mate." Ron nodded. "It's not like just breaking some school rule. It's so much beyond that line."

"What did Harry's mom want him to learn from these books? That's the big question." Hermione considered. "She never really said she expected you to use the dark arts. Just that you need the knowledge of dark magic."

"What's the difference?" Ron's brow wrinkled.

"The difference could be slight or incalculable." Hermione said almost to herself then seeing the confused looks of the others she elaborated. "It could be as simple as knowing counter curses to the spells in these books. Or it could be having enough knowledge of the magic involved to be able to change the spells to work for you but not as dark magic. To put your own power into the spells."

Once again Hermione's explanation seemed to make things more complicated rather than clarify them. Harry thought as he put the items back in his school trunk. Hermione had taken Slytherin's book to study after she had put a charm on it to preserve its crumbling pages.

Over the weekend Harry made a place for the runespoor to sleep, replacing the nightstand on the left side of his four-poster bed. The runespoor ate a lot more than Harry thought a snake would eat but then Hagrid reminded him the serpent had been in hibernation for over sixteen years and eventually her appetite would level off.

"She's beautiful." Hagrid marveled on Sunday when Harry and Ron had brought the runespoor to see him at his request. Which had been tricky because they had to continually cast a warming spell around them and the serpent to carrying her across the snowy school grounds to his warm cabin. "Do you think she'd mind if I patted her?"

"I'll ask." Harry stepped on Ron's foot to keep him from laughing too much and relayed the question.

"Hapa and Kesho don't mind." Harry pointed to them in turn. "But Giza says to keep thy giant hands to thy self." Hagrid put out a massive hand and stroked the two heads with reverence.

"Does it understand us when we speak Harry?" Ron asked.

"Do you?" Harry hadn't thought of this. "Do you understand what they are saying?"

The runespoor's three heads hissed almost snorting. "I have heard countless years of tongues and I know many languages though I cannot speak them." Hapa said.

"I'll take that as a yes." Harry felt a little irritated about not knowing. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Thou speaks our speech. No other words art needed for the master of the shield." Hapa nodded to him.

"Right." Harry watched as Giza changed her mind and wanted stroked by Hagrid too and started nudging his hand to get her share. Hagrid felt properly honored by the invitation. "Hagrid how much are runespoor eggs worth?"

"Ah, lots. Not many on the black market. Devil hard to come by. Professor Snape's been having me look..." Hagrid suddenly realized the why of Harry's interest. "Ah, he's wanting her eggs already eh?"

"I said I'd tell him how much I needed for an egg. But I don't know how much they're worth." Harry nodded. "I need to know how far I can expect to barter."

"You need to know so you know how far you can push him." Hagrid corrected looking at Harry keenly. "You be careful with Professor Snape, Harry. It's not good to poke a sleeping dragon in the eye."

"I'm not going to ask for any more than what he can afford." Harry assured him with a sly smile.

"Right." Hagrid snorted causing Giza to hiss at him. "Sorry love," He crooned to her. "Such a sweetie ya are."

Halfway through his animagus training on Tuesday, Professor McGonagall stopped him. "Where is your mind Potter? You seem miles away."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've had a lot on my mind lately." Harry blushed because of the real problem on his mind.

"Out with it, Potter. You're no good if you can't concentrate on your form." McGonagall looked at him sternly over her glasses.

Harry slumped back against a desk in the front row. "Right. It's the dance next month."

"What about it?" McGonagall asked.

"I don't really know how to...dance that is." Harry blurted out and flushed again.

McGonagall continued to stare at him then closed her eyes for a moment. "I know I'm going to regret this." She sighed and opened her eyes. "Do you want me to teach you how to dance?"

"Just the basics, if it wouldn't be too much trouble?" Harry grinned hopefully.

"Why is Professor McGonagall limping?" Hermione asked as she watched the transfiguration teach hobble up to the staff table in the great hall at dinner that evening. "She wasn't limping this morning." Harry didn't say anything but kept eating without looking up at the teachers.

"I don't know. She's old isn't she?" Ron shrugged.

"I've got occlumency. See you later." Harry drank down the last bit of pumpkin juice. He tried not to run out of the hall but walked very fast. He knew he was early for Snape but Harry didn't know if he could keep a straight face in front of Hermione much longer. The last thing he wanted going around the school is him having dancing lessons with McGonagall.

"Well, Potter?" Snape had his arms folded across his chest and leaned back in his chair as Harry stood across from him. "What is a runespoor egg going to cost me?"

"I've thought about this a lot, Professor. All I want from you is one day." Harry paused to savor the surprise in the sallow face. "For twenty-four hours no unfair treatment of Gryffindors. No points taken and no nasty remarks." As Harry spoke Snape's eyes blazed with anger.

"Is that all Potter?" Snape sneered.

"No, the day I want is the day of the dance, Professor." Harry replied. Snape stared at him for a long time without speaking.

"Two runespoor eggs for that Potter." Snape finally countered. "I do have my reputation to uphold."

"Professor, for two runespoor eggs you have to dance one dance with every female teacher attending the dance as well." Harry didn't know how he managed to keep a straight face. The appalled look on Snape's face was priceless. The internal struggle in Snape was

obvious. He wanted the eggs so badly but what Harry was asking was so against his nature.

"Fine Potter. It's a deal." Snape finally snapped. "If by some chance she produces an egg before the dance in December. But a serpent that has hibernated for so long probably won't produce anything so I really don't have to worry about it."

"Well, Professor, if she produces an egg afterwards and you haven't honor the agreement then the deal is completely off. No eggs period." Harry refused to back down from the fury in those black eyes.

There was a strangled growling noise from Snape's throat. "Fine. I'll do it." He snarled. "But if she never produces an egg I'll have a deal for you, Potter."

"Uh, right. It's a deal then." Harry flinch at the images of what Snape would make him do if the runespoor didn't produce any eggs.

"Shall we get on with occlumency then Potter? You've wasted enough of my time." Snape stood up withdrawing his wand. Harry quickly followed his lead and stood ready.

Snape showed no mercy. Relentlessly he launched an attack on Harry's mind. Harry held off the assault to enter his thoughts for a long time but the pain was excruciating. Ultimately Harry ended up on the floor gasping in pain once again.

"It isn't working" Harry moaned holding his head. "He doesn't enter my mind from the same direction."

"Explain Potter." Snape said sat in his desk chair frowning down at the teen on the floor.

"You're at me from the outside. He's already inside." Harry hadn't meant to say it that way but he knew it was true.

"What do you mean?" Snape leaned forward.

"I don't know. It's just different. Like he's already has a way in, his own private entrance." Harry managed to open his eyes and look up at Snape's startled face.

The potion master recovered his emotionless face. "It makes no difference Potter. You would just use the same power to deflected him back from whichever direction he enters." Snape seemed pleased with his answer to Harry's struggle.

"You don't know." Harry met the man's eyes. "You're just guessing."

"Well it is the best guess we have Potter." Snape drawled.

"By we, I assume you mean Dumbledore and yourself." Harry flared. "So he didn't know if this would work either?"

"Occlumency is the only thing open to you to discipline what little mind you have Potter." Snape sneered.

"But you once said the usual rules don't seem to apply to me. So you really don't know if it's helping or making the contact stronger." Harry eyes blazed, daring him to lie.

"No, Potter but it is the most logical way to go." Snape admitted.

"I'm getting bloody tired of being a guinea pig for you and the headmaster." Harry began to rage. "You don't know how this feels and you don't care."

"Potter this isn't the day we have agreed upon and I have no qualms about taking points from you and putting you in detention, today." Snape growled back.

"Do what you want." Harry snarled back. "I'm through with this rubbish." He grabbed his school bag and stormed from the room. He heard Snape yell at him to come back but he had already transformed into a phoenix. With a burst a flame Harry found himself once again gliding over the castle. In the snowy gray night, he winged his way to the astronomy tower and landed on the wall.

More than ever Harry wanted to fly far away from this place. Far away from Dumbledore and

Snape, unbidden the name Voldemort came to his mind. Could he fly away from Voldemort? Harry doubted it. Still he had that desperate feeling of not wanting to be Harry Potter any more. Not wanting the pain both mental and physical or responsibility that went with being him. He lifted his wings to fly off far from this place, from himself. But the image of Ron, Ginny and Hermione flashed into his mind followed closely by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Remus. How could he leave people who really care about him? How can he leave them to fight Voldemort without him?

Dropping his wings Harry changed back into his human form. He found it hard to be angry as a phoenix and he wanted to be angry. The wind and cold was biting and he was soon shivering but Harry didn't care. He was so tired of being deceived. He was tired of the pain and even though the pain in his scar had left, the memory lingered. As he trembled leaning against the wall of the tower Harry saw a flash of light high in the sky over the lake, then another flash nearly in the same spot.

Not wanting to freeze to death on the astronomy tower, Harry transformed back into the phoenix. He roosted on the wall watching the peaceful snow covered grounds and not feeling the cold as a bird. A burst of flame erupted above him. Harry watched as Fawkes lowered Dumbledore beside him.

"Please Harry don't go." Dumbledore said quickly. Harry transformed back into himself.

"I wasn't going to." Harry shivered. "I was cold and my phoenix self doesn't seem to notice it."

With a wave of his wand Dumbledore created a blazing fireplace, a hearthrug and two chintz armchairs. "Please sit down Harry we need to talk about what happened."

"How can I believe what you say anymore?" Harry stood stubbornly outside of the fire's warmth. "Why didn't you tell me occlumency might not work?"

"I believed it would. I had no reason not to until now, with your description of Voldemort's means of entering your mind to Professor Snape." Dumbledore insisted as he sat down near the fire and warmed his hands.

"Then how come Snape seemed to know there was a slim chance that occlumency wouldn't work?" Harry stepped closer, snow swirling around his ankles. "If he knew you knew. But you didn't see fit to tell me about any doubts you had."

"Occlumency works for most mind intrusions. I saw some progress from you so I had no reason to believe it wasn't working."

"The pain I kept having might have been a clue. I kept working hard, trying to put up with the pain but you never once said it might not work. Or are you going to tell me everybody that does occlumency goes through that." Harry was now shaking with anger rather than cold. "Do you get some perverse pleasure out of seeing me in pain all the time? I know Snape seems to like it." He turned away from the headmaster and strode toward the opposite wall. Dumbledore lifted his wand and Harry was gently deposited into the empty chair beside the fire.

"No Harry I don't like seeing you in pain. I am highly insulted you would say such a thing." Dumbledore said irritated. Then the old wizard sighed tiredly. "Harry everything I do lately seems to drive you away from me. We have to be on the same side to win against Voldemort. Don't you see that?"

Harry felt his chest tightened, he took deep breaths and swallowed trying to keep the knot out of his throat. "Right." Harry whispered leaning closer to the fire and put his face in his hands. Tears came to his eyes. That's all Dumbledore cared about when it came down to it, Harry surviving to defeat Voldemort. Harry was tired of living for a future that may or may not come. Didn't Dumbledore understand? A person needed to live more for today than for tomorrow?

"Harry?" Dumbledore's voice was puzzled. "Now what have I said?"

"Nothing. You didn't say anything that you haven't told me before, headmaster." Harry said hoarsely and rubbed his eyes. "I keep forgetting why I'm so important to you. Thanks again for reminding me." He swallowed hard trying to keep the tears back. "Can I go now?" Harry stood up wanting desperately to leave.

"No, Harry we need to talk this out. It has gone way too far as it is." Dumbledore objected taking hold of Harry's arm and forcing him back into the chair. "I do care about how you feel, Harry. More than you'll ever know. It hurts me to see us at odds like this and I know it hurts you." The old wizard didn't let go of Harry's arm and gave it a squeeze.

Harry stared at Dumbledore's hand on his arm. There was so much he wanted to say to Dumbledore but Harry didn't know how to put it into words. The overwhelming pressure he felt since learning about the prophecy, the confusion in his mind from just being a teenager and the things he needed to hear from the old man sitting next to him, yet the only thing he seemed able to articulate was his anger. "You have a strange way of showing you care." Harry finally said jerking his arm from Dumbledore's hand, his voice full of rage. "Leaving me with people that showed me nothing but hatred."

"That again." Dumbledore sighed.

"Oh I'm sorry my childhood is so unimportant. But let's face it. It makes me who I am doesn't it?" Harry rose from the chair again. "I don't want to be like the Dursleys but I'm not sure I want to be like you any more either." Harry paced to the edge of the fire's warmth and stared out into the night. "I really did want to fly away from Hogwarts, from you and everything that was me. But I couldn't leave the people who really care about me Ron, Hermione and Ginny, the Weasleys. Hogwarts used to feel like a home to me but right now I hate it here. I feel trapped." His words kept rushing out. "I used to feel safe here." He turned to glance at Dumbledore. "I used to feel safe with you but not anymore."

Dumbledore sat blinking hard, face filled with grief. "I'm sorry Harry. I never meant for this to happen. For you to feel trapped so much you want to run." The old wizard looked tired and confused. "I truly am at

a lost of what to do, Harry. Whatever I say seems to anger you so perhaps I fear to say the things I should."

Harry was only half listening. Something Kesho had said came to his mind. "Anger is the egg of fear." He said softly.

"Pardon?" Dumbledore said.

"Something Kesho said but I'm sure I've heard it somewhere before. Anger is the egg of fear. I've been so angry with you. Do I fear you?" Harry asked himself.

"I hope not." Dumbledore frowned. "You have no reason to fear me."

"Fear comes from within, not from without." Again Harry spoke to himself. "Same way Voldemort turns up in my mind. Interesting thought isn't it?" Harry finally looked over to Dumbledore again. "There are similarities, although I'm sure where his mind lies. So perhaps I do fear you because you can hurt me the most."

"I would never hurt you Harry." Dumbledore insisted.

Harry snorted. "You already have. So why should I believe you won't again?"

"I don't know what you want from me Harry. I can not change the past." Dumbledore kept his voice calm. "And I still believe at that time, and I had very little time to decide, your aunt and uncle were the safest place for you." The anger flared in Harry's eyes. "And for the rest of the world, yes, that too. What can I do to put these past events behind us?" Dumbledore asked.

After a long silence Harry answered slowly, his eyes meeting the headmaster's. "Three days."

"I beg your pardon?" Dumbledore asked confused.

"I want you to spend three days with me as a child with the Dursleys, before I came to Hogwarts." Harry gaze bore into Dumbledore's eyes. "I'll even let you pick which memories you visit." The old wizard

looked stunned. "If, after seeing what I went through for just three random days, you still think that was the best place for me," Harry sighed. "I'll agree to disagree about this and make peace with you."

"Let me see if I understand you correctly. You want me to take three random days from your memories and spend the time watching you with the Dursleys?" Dumbledore repeated almost as if confused. "I assume you want me to put the thoughts in the pensieve then enter into them." He received a nod from Harry. "Any three days?"

"Any." Harry nodded. "I know you are a busy man, Headmaster. So if you can't do all three at one time I understand but you have to do all three."

"I see. Interesting idea." Dumbledore nodded, putting his fingers together and tapping them. "And what does it mean, you'll make peace with me Harry?" he asked thoughtfully.

"It means I will never bring the subject up again. And between us it never happened." Harry said in a stone cold voice.

"You would be able to turn off your anger so easily?" Dumbledore questioned. "It has been difficult for you."

"If after you see my life with the Dursleys and you still think that was the right place, then the way I see it, I must be making too big of deal over it." Harry shrugged.

"You seem fairly confident I'll agree with you." Dumbledore noted. "You realize that days do not fall all in one memory? The mind sorts them as it sees fit not by the way of a calendar." Harry nodded. "Very well, Harry. I accept your offer." He paused thinking. "I think I'll be able to do the first Thursday. Instead of occlumency, I'll extract a memory from you and spend a day with you as a child."

"I'm sorry Professor. Are you alright?" Harry looked guilty as McGonagall rubbed her foot. It was Thursday and instead of his

afternoon animagus training Professor McGonagall was giving Harry another dance lesson.

"I'm fine Potter." Then she frowned at him. "As graceful as you are on a broom I thought this would be easy for you. But I suppose you aren't using your feet then are you?"

"Not really." Harry still felt bad. "If you don't want to continue I understand."

"Heavens no Potter. You are now a challenge. Although I do think I'll bring up at the next staff meeting the need to teach first years to dance." McGonagall snorted. "They are much smaller and it probably would be much less painful. Shall we try again? And listen to the music Potter."

Having a memory taken from your mind was a strange sensation Harry observed. It didn't hurt at all but when the silvery strand had broken contact with his temple he felt a definite snap in his mind, like the click of a latch. The headmaster had deposited the memory into the pensive looking quite optimistic about his choice. Harry had felt him search for a 'happy' feelings and it had taken Dumbledore sometime to choose.

"Did you wish to join me?" Dumbledore asked as he prodded the silvery substance in the pensive.

"No!" Harry snorted. "I lived it once and that's enough. I have homework anyway. Well I hope you enjoy my childhood as much as I did." He gave the headmaster a wave and left his office.

Dumbledore plunged into the pensive. After tumbling for a moment Dumbledore found he was in a crowded department store. He looked around for Harry reminding himself to look for a little boy. There on the clerk's counter sat a black haired boy about three smiling and contentedly sucking on a lollipop while the clerk fussed over him.

"What's your name dear?" The woman asked. Harry just smiled and shrugged. "Oh dear. Millicent? Could you get the manager? We have little lost boy here. Such pretty green eyes."

Dumbledore smiled. Harry looked happy enough. He watched as the manager came and an announcement was made over the loud speaker about a little lost boy.

"Harry?" Aunt Petunia's shrill voice made the smile vanish from little Harry. The little boy cringed as she fixed a false smile on her face and patted his head in front of the store personnel. She clamped her claw like hand on his wrist and practically dragged him out of the store. Dumbledore followed them to an awaiting car. "How many times have I told you to stay with us?" Petunia shouted as soon as the doors were shut and they were out of earshot of anybody. Dumbledore sat between little Harry and the big blonde boy he knew to be Dudley.

"You better watch yourself boy." Uncle Vernon roared. "We should have just left you for the police to cart off. Then we would have been done with you." Harry looked petrified but said nothing. Dudley grabbed the sucker and pinched Harry hard leaving a red mark. Little Harry started crying. "Be quite boy!" Uncle Vernon bellow. Aunt Petunia turned around in the front seat of the car and grabbed little Harry's arm and shook it.

"Hush, any little boy who get lost doesn't deserve a lollipop." She smiled indulgently at Dudley who had Harry's candy in his mouth. "Little boys who stay with their mothers deserve a treat."

The car pulled into number four Privet Drive. Vernon Dursley hoisted Dudley from the car and carried him into the house. Aunt Petunia set Harry roughly on the ground and he followed her inside. Dumbledore trailed after them.

At dinner Dudley sat on a booster seat and little Harry's nose barely reached the table as he sat on a regular chair. While Aunt Petunia made sure her son's meat and vegetables were cut up in small easy to chew bits, Harry had to struggle biting off pieces of what ever he

could reach on his plate. When pudding was served Dudley put up such a fuss he was given Harry's share.

When bedtime came Harry was dumped unceremoniously on to the bed in the cupboard under the stairs. Dumbledore could hear Vernon Dursley reading a story to his son. Then he saw little Harry creep out of the cupboard under the stairs and silently climb the stairs. Harry crawled and laid his little dark tousled head on the floor at the door of the bedroom, listening to the fairy-tale. The second the tale ended Harry ran back down the hall and plopped on his bottom to go quickly down the stairs.

The scene in front of him dissolved. Dumbledore now looked at a terrified little boy. A storm crackled the night and the boy huddled in his thin blanket, jumping with each flash of lightening and crash of thunder. Upstairs Dudley screamed for his mother and Aunt Petunia was soon carrying Dudley off to sleep in their bed. Little Harry once again crept out of his cupboard and crawled up the stairs shivering with the sounds of the storm.

Timidly he tapped on Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's bedroom door. The door swung open and Uncle Vernon looked down on the small boy. "What are you doing out of bed?"

Trembling Harry squeaked. "Scared." And held out his arms to be picked up. Dumbledore was relieved when the big man lifted the boy but the relief was short lived. Uncle Vernon didn't take him into their warm comforting bed but back down to the cupboard under the stairs.

"Boys who don't have parents need to learn to buck up. Nothing to be scared about just a storm." Uncle Vernon dropped little Harry back in his bed and shut the cupboard door. "You stay there. You hear me boy?"

The place changed, a morning sun shone brightly through the front door window. Dumbledore followed the three-year-old Harry into the kitchen. Aunt Petunia was breakfast feeding to Dudley in his booster seat. Harry hung on to a chair waiting until she was finished. She cleaned Dudley up and set him down on the floor.

Dudley tottered over to Harry and pushed him down. Little Harry scrambled away from the bigger boy's kicks squealing with fright. "Duddykins be careful you might slip." Aunt Petunia turned her back on the two boys and little Harry quickly crawled under the table and ran to hide behind her legs.

"Go boy, I've got things to do." She glared down at him and sighed. Aunt Petunia grabbed a piece of bread and buttered it hastily then handed it to Harry. "There, now don't get it all over everything." She frowned at him. Dumbledore felt a knot form in his stomach as he watched little Harry gobble down the piece of bread not dropping a crumb.

The rest of the morning Dumbledore followed the three-year-old around. Little Harry could have been invisible for all the attention he received from the family. Only if he made noise, cried or did something 'wrong' did the Dursleys even speak to him. And then it was in the form of a harsh order or reprimand.

Dumbledore returned to his office after his day with little Harry was over. He sat for a long time gazing at the pensive. Then he picked the stone basin up and stored it in his cupboard. The old wizard went to the window and looked out over the snow-covered grounds deep in thought.

Author's notes: Thanks for the reviews!!

Things are really getting sticky. This chapter took forever. The pensive thing wasn't supposed to start happening until after Christmas but when I tried to write the tower scene without it there wasn't an ending to go to, if that makes any sense. I hope I don't mess up the timing of things later in the story. Oh well, I'll adapt. I was going to put the pensive scene in italics but I think it would be too hard to read, so I didn't.

Oh yeah. Almost forgot.

Anger is the egg of fear - Jungle Books- Rudyard Kipling. Also a big help with snake talk.

Chapter 26

"What's your hurry?" Harry asked as he watched Ron rush to change out of his quidditch robes after practice.

"Hermione said she would help me with my potions homework." Ron started stuffing his robes into his school bag.

"Right. You seem to have a lot of potions homework these days." Harry smirked a little.

Ron's ears turned red but he just gave Harry a grin. "It's been a nightmare. I'm just lucky to have Hermione help me through it."

"She must be pretty good holding your hand." Harry laughed as Ron realized what Harry was talking about.

"Yeah she's good at many things if you know what I mean." Ron stared him down this time and laughed when Harry flushed.

"Touché." Harry laughed. "Well better go study." He waved his hands to shoo Ron off. Ron gave him a shove and left the changing room.

Harry returned to the common room he went to the dorm and put his Firebolt in his trunk. He carried his school bag down to the common room to finish his charms essay.

"Mind if I sit with you?" Harry asked Ginny.

"No." Ginny pulled some books out of the way and Harry sat down looking around.

"Where are Ron and Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Off snogging somewhere." Ginny said without looking up as if she was discussing the weather. Harry snorted as he pulled out his charms book.

"I haven't really seen much of those two." Harry thought aloud. "Except for class but we haven't really talked. Not like we used to."

"Hermione has noticed too." Ginny looked up. "I think Ron has but with him it's hard to tell."

"I've been busy but not any busier than other years." Harry frowned. "I guess I get a bit caught up in myself to think about it." He admitted.

"It takes a big person to admit something like that." Ginny gazed at him. "Most people just say they're too busy and leave it at that."

"Well, a person needs to take stock of their shortcomings. Especially since I don't have Snape telling me what they are." Harry shrugged.

Ginny leaned on her hand and smiled at him. "And what are your shortcomings?"

"What? You want a list?" Harry felt this conversation was getting strange.

"Just a couple." Ginny grinned.

"Well, I can be kind of moody." Harry said thoughtfully. "And stubborn. Is that enough?"

"One more." Ginny insisted.

Harry thought about it for a moment. "I'm not sure what else. You could check with Snape. He'd give you a long list."

"Want me to tell you one?" Ginny eyes sparkled Harry noticed.

"I was afraid it would come to this. Okay what have you noticed about me that irritates you?" Harry gave her a lopsided smile.

"You can be as tightly shut as that trunk of your mum's or you spill your guts in a burst of anger." Ginny snickered.

"Too much information or not enough, eh?" Harry laughed then countered. "Alright Ms. Weasley what are your shortcomings?"

"I don't have any." Ginny said as if it was common knowledge and went back to her homework.

"I know. You probably snore and drool in your sleep." Harry teased trying to get a rise out of her.

"Oh Harry, you'll have to do better than that. I do have six older brothers you know." Ginny turned a page.

"I'm way out of my league with them. So I'll concede defeat." Harry threw up his hands.

"You sure gave up easily." Ginny chuckled.

"Loose the battle win the war." Harry muttered then a little louder. "I'm saving my strength for bigger disputes."

Ginny frowned at her homework. "I hope Hermione gets back soon. She said she'd look over my potions work. I don't know how she does it all."

"I would offer to look at it but you probably want the right answers." Harry said writing his way down a roll of parchment. Ginny laughed and set aside her potions work. She rummaged through her books and found Ancient Runes. She gave a deep sigh and opened the book. Harry glanced at her now and then. Occasionally catching her eye and they would both smile at each other. It felt strange to sit with Ginny knowing he would be going to the dance with her in two weeks time and their relationship would change whether they wanted it to or not. Strange but nice at the same time.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Crookshanks carrying something toward the boys' staircase. "Hey! Hold on." Harry bolted from his seat and chased the ginger cat up to his dorm.

"What does he have?" Ginny had followed him up the stairs. "Yuck. A rat." She wrinkled her nose.

"Why did he bring it up here?" Harry stalked over to the dead rat Hermione's cat had put near the runespoor's bed.

"Hisss. He gotsss it for us." Giza's head slithered up flicking her tongue. "A light snack."

"Did you ask Crookshanks to catch you a rat?" Harry asked.

"Yesss. Nice beast, likes to kill rats." Hapa watched Giza clamp her jaws on the dead rodent.

"You speak cat?" Harry glanced at Crookshanks cleaning his paw on Harry's bed.

"Speak? Cat language is much more than sounds. Humans are blind to the body's talk." Hapa said.

"Right, I guess if Crookshanks doesn't mind I don't. Enjoy." Harry turned away from the feeding serpent. Ginny stared at him, waiting for an explanation. He smiled and started to tell her when a sharp pain went through his scar. He clutched his forehead.

"Your scar?" Ginny asked concerned.

"Yeah, I haven't felt anything for a while now. Nothing this strong." Harry leaned against his bed, trying to block the pain with little success. Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his cool hand across the scar resigned to wait for the pain to ease. Another, softer hand stroked the length of his scar. Like magic the pain vanished. Harry's eyes snapped open to see Ginny in front of him.

"How did you do that?" Harry said softly.

"What?" Ginny dropped her hand as if she had done something wrong. The pain came back like a stabbing knife. Harry winced and gritted his teeth. "What did I do?" Ginny now sounded worried.

"The pain. You stopped the pain." Harry squinted at her. "How did you do that?" he repeated.

"I don't know." Ginny shook her head then hesitantly she gently placed her fingers on his scar again. The relief in Harry's face

showed her the pain had vanished again. For a long moment they stared into each other's eyes. Harry gazed in wonder at her then a smile crept on to his face.

"Do you think I can convince Ron you need to stay by my bed in case my scar hurts in the night?" Harry asked.

Ginny blushed and then giggled. "I think he'd have to put a full body bind curse on you before he would allow that." Then her face sobered. "I wonder why the pain stops when I touch your scar."

Harry didn't really hear her. He was too busy noticing the intense brown of her eyes, flecked with highlights of gold. His gaze dropped to her lips and he bent closer. Harry looked back into her eyes as if to ask permission. Ginny seemed frozen but her eyes brightened with surprise. As he lowered his head Harry felt her breath stop. His lips just brushed hers when Ron's voice and footsteps thundered up the stairs. Hastily they broke apart. Ginny moved away and the pain in Harry's scar returned. Grasping his forehead Harry leaned against the bed again.

"What are you doing up here Ginny? You're not supposed to be in the boys' dorms." Ron glanced back and forth at the two of them. "Harry?" He had noticed his friend's pain. Ginny told him about Crookshanks bring the rat to the runespoor. Hesitantly she told him about Harry's scar hurting but nothing more. Taking her lead Harry didn't say anything about her touch affecting his scar.

"I want to catch Hermione before she goes to bed." Ginny said. "Good night Harry...Ron." She blushed for almost forgetting to say goodnight to her own brother.

"Are you alright Harry?" Ron asked. "Need any help?"

"I'll be alright. Could you get my stuff from the common room? I left my homework and bag down there." Harry went to his wardrobe still holding his forehead and pulled out pajamas.

"Sure no problem." Ron gazed at his friend for a moment then hurried down the stairs.

In bed Harry tried to block out the still burning scar with little success. Harry let his mind open since closing it didn't seem to help. A dark moldy wall filled his vision for a moment then he turned away pacing with anger.

"It is all set? He suspects nothing?" Voldemort seethed.

"No my Lord. All will go as ordered." Malfoy assured him.

"If you let Harry Potter ruin my plan this time. You will receive the full power of my displeasure. Understand Lucius?" Harry could feel the absolute fury in Voldemort words as the agony intensified.

"Yes, my Lord. I will not fail you." Lucius dropped to his knees before him.

"See that you don't. Go." Voldemort waved his spidery hand at the figure before him.

Quickly Harry pulled away from the dark wizard's mind. He didn't want Voldemort to know he had heard anything. Gasping and sweating Harry lay frozen as the pain ebbed little by little. Finally he managed to sit up in bed. He had to tell someone.

Still shaking Harry pulled on his dressing gown and staggered down the spiral stairs. He pushed open the portrait and climbed out. His mind confused with pain, Harry headed down the hall not really having a goal in mind. His feet led the way toward the transfiguration classroom but half way there, Harry stopped. McGonagall wouldn't be there now, it was the middle of the night. He stood as if stunned and blinked at the brightness of a torch in its bracket. Harry turned to go back to McGonagall quarters.

"Potter." A cold sneering voice drifted up the hall. Snape smirking face came into view. "What are you doing out of bed at this time of night Potter? Fifty points from Gryffindor and a week of detention."

"I've got to tell someone." Harry winced as too spoke too loud. "Voldemort is planning something." He leaned on the wall rubbing his forehead then repeated. "I have to tell someone."

"What are you blathering about Potter?" Snape tried to sound unconcerned but failed. "Come with me." A harsh grip took a hold of Harry's arm. Snape led him down to the stone gargoyle and spoke the password. He shoved Harry onto the moving steps and then followed. Snape knocked on the headmaster's door and then entered.

No light shone from any of the torches and the embers in the fireplace glowed softly. Snape pushed Harry into the chair in front of Dumbledore's desk. "Wait here." He snapped and turned to the fireplace. He groped on the mantle for a handful of floo powder and threw it in the dieing fire. It blazed green and Snape stepped into the emerald flames. "Dumbledore's room." Snape began to spin and then disappeared.

The darkness of the office felt soothing to Harry's eyes. Despite his irritation with Dumbledore, the presence of the great wizard still lingered and calmed Harry as he waited. A moment later Dumbledore appeared in the flames and stepped out of the fireplace, followed closely by Snape. The headmaster raised his wand and the light level in the room increased. Harry put up a hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

"It was better the other way." Harry blinked through watering eyes. Dumbledore dimmed the torches. "Thanks." He sighed.

"What have you heard Harry." Dumbledore asked watching him closely. Harry told him about Voldemort's conversation he overheard. "Voldemort did not feel you were there?" The old wizard questioned.

Thinking Harry glanced at Snape who stood off to the side near the door. His face showed no reaction to what Harry had heard. "No. He didn't. Voldemort was in a rage. I think it sort of shielded me from him." Harry saw Dumbledore's gaze flick to Snape.

"Who is Voldemort after?" Harry asked looking back to Snape who flinched at the name.

"We can only guess Harry." Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "Karkaroff comes to mind. Perhaps the Death Eaters have caught up to him." He sighed.

"Or you." Harry gazed pointedly at Snape. The swallow face showed no emotion to his suggestion but Harry saw a convulsive swallow.

"Perhaps." Snape said softly. "But I doubt it Potter. My allegiance has not been challenged. I am his spy on the headmaster. He needs me here."

Now Harry stared almost in shock at the potion master, never had Snape said so many words to him without a sneer in his voice. "I hope you're right Professor." As much as he hated Snape, Harry didn't want him to fall into Voldemort's trap.

"Professor Snape, would you see Harry back to Gryffindor tower?" Dumbledore asked still studying Harry closely.

"I'm okay. I can manage Headmaster." Harry stood up but Dumbledore's stare had met Snape's

"Certainly, Headmaster." Snape nodded. "Come on Potter." He opened the office door and gestured for Harry to precede him. Harry had no choice so he nodded to Dumbledore and left the office.

It was the strangest walk through the castle that Harry could remember. Neither one of them spoke but oddly Harry felt protected by Snape's escort. At the portrait of the fat lady Harry bid the potions master goodnight. The man merely nodded and left without a word. Harry watched the lean back disappear wondering if Snape was bothered by his vision of Voldemort.

With the Holiday fast approaching Harry began to feel nervous with the upcoming dance on Saturday. True he hadn't stepped on McGonagall's feet at the last dance lesson but he felt a bit awkward.

McGonagall tried to assure him all teenage boys feel that way, still Harry wished he had learned to dance sooner.

Since it was Christmas, the dance would start with a feast at seven o'clock. By Saturday afternoon the great hall had been closed off to be decorated and many of the girls went off to get ready for the dance. At six o'clock Harry and Ron went up to the dormitory to change into their dress robes.

While Harry hesitated over which dress robes to wear, Ron, Seamus, Dean and Neville pulled on their dress robes. Glancing nervously up to see what the other guys were wearing Harry grinned at Ron's new robes. The royal blue material suited Ron's complexion and red hair.

"What's taking you so long?" Ron asked tugging at his collar.

"I'm trying to decide which robes to wear." Harry opened the box with his scarlet robes.

"What do you mean?" Ron came over to see. "Whoa! Outstanding, Harry!"

"You like it?" Harry pulled the robes out and held them up. "You don't think it's a bit flashy?"

"No way," Ron assured him. "Put them on. We'll be the judges." Ron indicated the rest of the six-year boys.

Slowly Harry slipped into the shimmering robes. Low mummings of approval filled the room before he looked up from fastening the front. "Well?"

"Excellent Harry." Seamus whistled.

"Never seen anything like it." Dean marveled.

"You look great Harry." Neville reached out and felt the sleeve.

"Brilliant Harry." Ron agreed. "Four out of four. You can't beat that."

"You could..." Seamus started then changed his mind.

"What?" Harry glanced down to see if something was wrong then back at the other teens. Ron and the others gave each other an agreeing glance.

"I think it would look better if you shaved Harry." Ron braved. "You really don't have enough to be called a beard. It just makes your face look, well, dirty."

"Shave?" Harry reached up and felt his chin and jaw then hurried to the mirror. Sure enough what Ron said was true; a gray shadow covered his lower face in a haphazard way. "I don't have a razor."

"What?" Ron looked puzzled. "Just use the shaving charm."

"The what?" Harry turned to see the other boys' nods, telling him once again his lack of wizarding world general information was showing.

"Didn't anyone ever...?" Ron face dropped in realization, Harry had no one to tell him anything. "I'll show you. It can be a little trick. Fred slipped once and shaved off his left eyebrow. Although I think he kind of liked the look."

"What do I do?" Harry felt a surge of panic. What would he look like if he appeared at the dance with one eyebrow?

"Don't worry. Why don't I do it for you?" Ron suggested. "Conjure a chair and sit down." Harry quickly conjured a barber's chair and took a seat.

"Didn't your Uncle ever teach you how to shave?" Dean asked. "My dad taught me two years ago."

Harry snorted. "Last summer my Uncle brought home this cheap plastic razor for me to use. I tried it once and cut myself so many times I thought I'd need a blood rejuvenation potion. So I decided just to annoy him I'd just leave any stubble."

"Okay, Harry lean back and hold still." Ron said. He shook his wand a little and said. "Excorio." A blue glow came from the tip of Ron's wand. As Ron carefully laid the tip on Harry's cheek and drew the wand over his skin, a warm fuzzy feeling followed the wand tip. After five minutes Ron said. "That's it. You're done. Take a look."

Harry went to the mirror and felt the smooth chin and cheeks. "Thanks Ron. I owe you."

"Naw, Harry, he doesn't want his sister getting stubble burn." Seamus laughed. There was a general snicker from the other boys, even Dean Thomas. Harry felt a warmth creep into his cheeks now. "See you at the dance. I've got to meet up with Susan Bones from Hufflepuff." Dean and Neville followed Seamus down the stairs.

"I thought it would be cool you dating my sister..." Ron started sheepishly.

"Having mixed feelings?" Harry grinned.

"More like scrambled." Ron snorted. "I really don't know what I'll do if I catch you two kissing."

Harry snorted back. "If you would have come up to the dorm a couple seconds later the other day we'd both know." Ron's eyes grew big. The mixture of emotions flashed across his freckled face. Humor won out and he laughed.

"Alright, I know it is inevitable." Ron nodded then soberly he said. "Just don't hurt her Harry." His brow furrowed.

"Never," Harry met his best friend's eyes. "Ron, I have too much respect for Ginny and for your whole family to do anything that would jeopardize our trust of each other." He held out his hand to Ron. Ron grasped it firmly and clapped Harry's shoulder.

"Thanks, Harry that means a lot." Ron said. "Well, we better get downstairs. Can't have the women waiting for us."

"Hang on; I want to get my camera." Harry went to his trunk and took out the magical camera Lupin had given him for his birthday. "Okay, let's go." They hurried down to the Gryffindor common room, where it was much like the night of the Yule ball when the Tri-Wizard Tournament was held with many different color robes milling around waiting.

Parvati came down the girls' stairs with Lavender. Both paused at the bottom to gaze in Harry's direction. Their stare began to make Harry feel uncomfortable so he messed with the camera's setting but ignoring them didn't seem to work.

"Wow Harry." Lavender said. "You look...wonderful."

"I'll say." Parvati sighed. "Save me at least one dance?" She looked at him pathetically.

"Well, I..." Harry's attention drew back to the girl's staircase. Hermione and Ginny descended gracefully. The pair took Harry's breath away. Wearing gold beaded silk robes, Hermione looked like a queen striding toward Ron. But his jaw dropped open as Harry gazed at Ginny smiling shyly as she walked toward him. Harry stepped forward past Parvati and Lavender. Her emerald velvet robes swirled around her as she came to a stop in front of him.

"You look beautiful, Ginny." Harry felt the word was horribly lacking but couldn't come up with anything better.

Ginny flushed and grinned. "Thanks. So do you! I love your robes Harry."

"Thanks." Harry laughed. "Oh, before we go, let's get some pictures." He looked around and spotted Mark Evens. "Hey Mark? Would you take some pictures for us?"

"Sure Harry." Mark grinned. Harry showed him how to work the camera and the two couples posed for the first year.

"Thanks Mark. Could you run the camera back up to my dorm and just set it on one of the trunks?" Harry asked and the boy nodded. "Thanks."

"Have fun." Mark waved as the four left the common room.

After helping Ginny from the portrait hole Harry offered her his arm. "My lady?" He gave her a slight bow. Ginny giggled and slipped her hand around his arm. Ron offered his arm to Hermione and the four went down to the great hall.

Crystal clear icicles dangled in the air above round tables in the great hall when two couples entered, following the crowd. The twelve Christmas trees stood along the walls twinkling with fairy lights and sparkling ornaments. Each table had a center piece of holly and ivy with a candle in the center.

Hermione spotted Neville with Luna Lovegood sitting at a table. "Let's sit with them." She suggested. Everybody agreed and they make their way over to the table.

"Hi, Luna. Hi Neville. Can we sit with you two?" Hermione asked.

"Sure." Neville grinned and glanced at Luna.

"Please do." Luna said smiling dreamily. She wore shocking neon green robes of some lacy material. But somehow Harry thought that color looked good on her as he held the chair out for Ginny to sit down.

Once seated, they watched the rest of the students file into the great hall. Draco Malfoy entered with Pansy Parkinson on his arm. Then Cho Chang walked through the door in periwinkle blue robes with Michael Corner. Harry turned to Ginny and saw her watching the couple proceed into the hall.

"Any regrets?" Harry asked smiling.

"None. You?" Ginny returned the grin.

"Not a one." Harry answered truthfully. Cho Chang didn't interest him in the least anymore. Harry didn't even bother looking back to see where Cho had sat down.

"I can't believe the holidays are here already." Hermione said.

"Yeah." Ron sighed.

"Oh Ron stop. You'll have fun at my house. I promise you." Hermione rolled her eyes.

"It is going to seem strange without you two around for Christmas." Harry said then seeing Neville and Luna's questioning looks he added. "Ron is staying with Hermione this year, a muggle house."

"I don't think I'd have the nerve." Neville whispered.

"I've always have wanted to." Luna admitted. "Muggles are fascinating."

"I bet they are." Ron said in a forced pleasant voice.

When the Great Hall finally filled the teacher filed in to take their seats at two large round tables at the end of the hall. Dumbledore stood up, wearing magnificent metallic silver robes and said.

"Welcome. I hope you all find this an agreeable substitute for Hogsmeade visits. You'll discover many of the cuisines you would find there are here tonight. So enjoy!" Dumbledore sat down and food appeared on all the tables.

Harry passed a platter of steak to Ginny who took a small piece and passed it on. As tempting as it was to stuff himself on all the delicious food in front of him, Harry knew he wouldn't feel like dancing much on a full stomach. So Harry refused seconds when the platter came around again. After the main course came pudding. The elaborately decorated cakes were accented with many of Honeydukes best sweets. Ginny pulled a large cracker with Harry and matching solid

gold bracelets popped out. Giving her grinning glances, Harry fastened the bracelet on to her wrist and she returned the favor.

After the meal was finished Dumbledore stood and indicated the rest of the hall should do the same. Like had done for the Yule Ball the headmaster with one sweep of his wand moved the tables to the edge of the room then raised a platform for the band. In trooped the Weird Sisters and soon music filled the great hall.

"May I have this dance?" Harry bowed to Ginny and held out his hand. She giggled and put her hand in his. He led her out onto the dance floor and swallowing nervously Harry took her in his arms. In his head McGonagall voice rose. "Listen to the music Potter." Harry tried but the moment he looked down at Ginny everything else seemed to fade into the background like fog. His heart swelled with a tightness strange to him. She was so beautiful Harry thought as he started dancing around the hall with her. To his surprise he didn't feel awkward in Ginny's arms. Their moments never seemed to get in the way of each other.

"You're a good dancer." Ginny smiled at him.

"I had a very patient teacher. But you're pretty good yourself." Harry told her. "Did Fred and George teach you?"

"Oh no. My mum and dad. They love to dance. When I was little I'd stand on dad's feet while he and Mom dance." Ginny reminisced.

"I stood on my teacher's feet quite a bit too. But I don't think she care for it much." Harry chuckled.

"Who?" Ginny asked.

"I'm not telling." Harry shook his head.

"Oh come on. Tell me." Ginny insisted.

"You can guess but I'm not telling you." Harry finally found something he could tease Ginny with.

"Hermione?"

"Nope. Not even warm." Harry felt a couple brush past them. Ron and Hermione looked their way and grinned.

"Your Aunt?" Ginny guessed.

"Yeah right." Harry snorted.

"Tell me." Ginny obviously didn't like not knowing.

"I'll tell you after the dance if you can't guess." Harry conceded.

"You better." Ginny warned.

"Or what?" Harry challenged leaning closer touching her nose with his.

"You really don't want to know." Ginny gave him a wicked smile.

"Oh, that's really scary." Harry cringed. "You sound like Fred and George."

"I am my brothers' sister." Ginny stopped dancing. Harry just then realized the song had ended. They clapped for the band. The next song was a fast paced and Harry and Ginny quickly plunged into the rhythm of the beat. Afterwards laughing and breathless they headed back to the table to quench their thirst before another dance. Harry had seen Snape dancing with Professor McGonagall. He hated to admit it but the man could dance.

"Let's trade dance partners." Hermione said suggested when Neville and Luna arrived for a drink too.

"Sounds like fun." Ginny agreed. "Come on Neville." She grabbed his hand and headed to the floor.

"Hermione?" Harry took her hand and followed leaving Ron with Luna. "How's it going?" Harry asked as they dance.

"Pretty good. We've been missing you though." Hermione gave him a kind smile. "Ron and I didn't mean to shut you out."

"You haven't." Harry assured her. "I know you two will always be there if I need you." Then he frowned. "That's doesn't sound quite right does it? Only going to you if I need something."

"I know what you meant though." Hermione squeezed his hand then she frowned. "How did you get to be such a good dancer?"

"I'm not telling." Harry snorted. "I didn't even tell Ginny, yet."

"You two look wonderful together." Hermione grinned. "Although Ron has been kind of weird. Part of the time he's all for you two getting together then the next moment he brooding about it."

"I think I calmed some of his worries before the dance." Harry said when she looked at him questioningly he added. "I told him I have too much respect for his whole family to do anything that would jeopardize that trust."

"That's exactly what Ron needed to hear Harry." Hermione smiled. "You're getting pretty good at this feeling stuff."

"You know I was thinking. You are like my sister; I should make him give me a similar promise." Harry looked at her appraisingly. To his surprise tears sprang into Hermione's eyes and she gave him a hug.

"That's the nicest thing you ever said to me Harry." She blinked back her tears. "You can be so sweet." Harry saw her bite her lip as if she wanted to say more but held back.

"What?" Harry asked wondering what just went through her mind.

"Oh nothing." But when Harry still stared at her Hermione sighed. "You are so nice and all this stuff happens to you..." She blinked back tears. "It just isn't fair. And I know, life isn't fair but you do get more than your share of heart aches."

"Tell me about it." Harry snorted. Then considering he looked into her eyes. "But for the absence of all the pain, I couldn't and wouldn't give up the friends I have right now."

"Stop it Harry. You're going to make me cry." Hermione laid her head on his shoulder. "Despite what you tell yourself Harry, you are a very special person." She whispered.

"Thanks Hermione." Harry felt a lump in his throat and hoped he wouldn't start blubbering here in the great hall. Luckily for him the dance ended and he took Luna for the next turn around the floor.

"How's it going Luna?" Harry looked into her protuberant eyes.

"Lovely." Luna said.

"Are you and Neville seeing a lot of each other?" Harry asked.

"Oh, now and then. He's really sweet you know." Luna smiled. "Ginny and you look like you were made for each other."

"Uh, Thanks." Harry didn't know what to say to that. "I like your robes. It's a good color for you."

"Thank you. It isn't quite the shade I wanted. I may have to experiment with some charms to brighten them up a bit." Luna said.

"Uh, yeah that might work." Harry swallowed and tried not to laugh. If Luna's robes got any brighter they would burn everyone's eyes out. He thought. Harry glanced over to see Ron and Ginny dancing, grinning at each other. Hermione and Neville moved into view and Harry noticed Neville wasn't stepping on to Hermione's toes.

"Neville looks like he's had a few dance lessons." Harry noted.

"Oh yes, I insisted on it." Luna nodded looking critically at Neville. "Dancing is not to be taken lightly. A person could get seriously hurt with a wrong step."

"Right." Harry agreed, again trying not to laugh.

"It's good to see you happy again, Harry." Luna met his eyes. "You are quite elegant looking tonight, a striking representation of a powerful wizard."

"Thanks." Harry didn't know what else to say as he gazed into the honesty of her eyes.

""You're quite welcome." Luna nodded. "Oh, the song is over." She looked toward the band. "They are very good aren't they?" She added clapping.

"Yes they are. Thanks for the dance Luna." Harry said as they went back to the table.

"Thank you Harry. You are quite a good dancer." Luna spotted Neville and beamed. "But not as good as Neville."

The next song was a slow one and Harry reclaimed Ginny for the dance. As Ginny laid her head against his shoulder Harry felt the swelling in his chest again. With his cheek softly touching hers, Harry swayed Ginny to the music then he felt her sigh and wondered how many times he had sighed since he had taken her into his arms. Nothing in his life had ever felt as good to him as holding Ginny close. "I hope this song never ends." He whispered and felt her sigh again.

"Me too." Ginny breathed and he pulled her closer. Halfway through the dance Harry pulled away a little to look down at the floor. Ginny glanced questioningly at him.

"I just wanted to see if my feet were still on the ground." Harry whispered in her ear and pulling her close again. He felt her giggle and sigh once more. Eventually the tune changed and the pace picked up in the next few sets after which Harry and Ginny paused to quench their thirst with butterbeer.

"Can I have this next dance Ginny?" Dean Thomas asked when Harry and Ginny had risen to go back out on the dance floor.

"Do you mind?" Ginny looked at Harry.

"No not at all." Harry shook his head then glanced across the great hall. "In fact there's someone I want to ask for a dance myself."

"Go on then." Ginny said in an odd voice that confused Harry. But when he saw who was standing near the person he wanted to ask Harry understood. Cho Chang stood in the direction he had glanced and Ginny was, jealous? Harry grinned at he walked closer to his intended goal. Cho's eyes lit up when she saw Harry walking toward her. But he stopped before he reached Cho Chang.

"Professor McGonagall, may I have this dance?" Harry bowed and held out his hand. A rare smile broke on her face.

"I would be honored Mr. Potter." She put her hand in his and let him sweep her on the dance floor. Harry got a fleeting glance of the disappointment on Cho's face as he turned in step with his teacher.

"You have made your dance teacher proud tonight Harry." McGonagall said.

"Thanks, I owe her a lot." Harry grinned.

"I must say Harry, you have the poise and grace tonight of another student I remember." McGonagall told him then added. "And I do not mean your father. Oh James had poise and grace but with a touch of arrogance which diluted those other qualities." She smiled. "No I am reminded of another long ago, when I attended Hogwarts."

"A boy friend?" Harry asked trying to imagine McGonagall as a girl.

"No, he was in seventh year when I was started my first. But he was the type of person one does not forget." McGonagall smiled. "I am speaking of Professor Dumbledore."

"Uh, Thanks." Harry was a little taken aback.

"It was a compliment Potter." She snorted amused. "You and Ms Weasley make a fine couple."

"I keep hearing that." Harry grinned. "Professor Snape doesn't dance half bad."

McGonagall frowned. "Did you put him up to dancing tonight? He never dances at the teachers' parties."

"Runespoor eggs." Harry gave her an evil look.

"That explains it." McGonagall laughed. "I hoped you made a good deal." She chuckled more when Harry told him of the agreement.

"Woe to you if that serpent doesn't lay any eggs." His teacher said.

"I don't have to worry about that." Harry said. Then he spotted Snape dancing with Professor Sprout and again was surprised at how well the man could dance. Too bad Harry thought as the tune ended. He bowed to McGonagall and she thanked him for the dance.

"Why didn't you tell me it was McGonagall you wanted to dance with?" Ginny poked him as he took her from Dean Thomas.

"Ouch." Harry laughed. "Who did you think I was going to ask?"

"Don't play innocent with me. You knew I saw Cho standing there." Ginny poked him again.

"Would it bother you if I had asked her?" Harry asked.

"Well, yeah. A little." Ginny blushed. "Didn't it bother you to see me with Dean?"

"I didn't watch." Harry put bluntly. "I didn't want to see if you two looked good together."

"Oh," Ginny melted. "Everybody keeps saying we look good together."

"Really! I haven't heard anything about it." Harry said innocently.

"Yeah right. You are a lousy liar, Harry." Ginny laughed.

"I think you might be a legilimens Miss Weasley." Harry flinched.
"Please keep your powers to yourself."

"I think I'll need all the power I have to keep up with you, Mr. Potter."
Ginny grinned and Harry took her off for another waltz around the hall.

After the dance ended, Harry asked Ginny to take a walk outside to cool off. Soon they were walking the conjured garden paths in front of the castle, Harry's hand firmly holding Ginny's. He marveled how a simple thing like holding hands could give him such pleasure. The softness of her skin, how her smaller hand seemed just right for his and especially how she held his hand too.

"It's so pretty out here. The teachers really did go all out for us."
Ginny sighed as they passed a statue fountain and a long bench.

"It is beautiful." Harry agreed but he wasn't looking at the castle grounds and when Ginny saw him looking at her she flushed and became unusually shy. "I mean it Ginny I can't take my eyes off you."

"Thanks." Ginny gazed up at him for a few moments then turned to walk on. Harry held her hand so she couldn't move on and drew her back to him. He saw her swallow nervously as he cupped her chin with his free hand.

"Ginny this has been the best night I can remember." Harry leaned in slowly watching her eyes grow larger. Gently Harry touched her lips with his and felt her intake of breath then he slowly deepened the kiss. A warm sensation started in his toes and crept up his entire body. Harry felt there was no more need for the sun. He could merely melt the winter snows away with a kiss from Ginny. All too soon the kiss ended.

"Wow." Harry whispered still holding her cheek.

"Yeah, wow." Ginny agreed. Harry slid his hand down to take her waist but had to awkwardly avoid her breasts.

"What was that?" Ginny giggled leaning her head against his chest.

"I didn't want to touch...well, I want to but I know I'm not supposed to." Harry stuttered then laughed. "Quit laughing. This is supposed to be romantic."

"I'm sorry. Where were we?" Ginny looked up at him innocently. When Harry leaned down to kiss her again their noses banged together. "Ouch."

"Sorry." Harry flinched too. His glasses had jammed against his nose. "I've not had much practice at this to tell you the truth."

Ginny looked at him. "Didn't you and Cho kiss?"

"Well, Cho kissed me. I didn't start it or anything." Harry didn't want the memory of Cho's crying to taint his time with Ginny. "Can I try again?"

"Sure," Ginny nodded but the moment his lip touched hers she began to giggle. "I'm sorry Harry." She got ready again but this time started giggling before he even touched her lips.

"I can see I'm getting no where with this. Want to go dance?" Harry laughed to show her he wasn't mad. "I don't about the affect I have on women. When they kiss me they either burst out cry or dissolve into laughter."

"I said I was sorry." Ginny took his hand. "That first one was really good."

"Thanks." Harry grinned then his face fell, in front of them stood Snape. Then he remembered the deal he had made. "Good evening Professor Snape. Enjoying the dance?"

The snarl on Snape's face would have made first years run for their lives. His eyes narrowed at the confidence in Harry face. "Don't push it Potter. I almost hope the runespoor never produces an egg just so I'd have you in my service."

"Oh, I almost forgot." Harry fished into his robe pocket and withdrew a carefully wrapped package. "Here's half the payment." He held it out to Snape. The man's dark eyes flashed and he licked his lips as if in anticipation.

"Very good Potter." Snape took the egg, weighing it in his hand. "Have any trouble getting it from her? I heard runespoor can be moody about giving up eggs."

"Perhaps but Hapa, Kesho and Giza are very old and are quite used to it." Harry told him.

Biting his lips Snape glanced back to the great hall. "Better get back to the dance Potter, Weasley." He turned on his heel and left.

The last dance of the evening moved slowly and tranquilly. Once again Harry turned Ginny gently around the hall. Her arms were around his neck, his hands on her waist with their foreheads together gazing into each other's eyes. Harry felt his heart swell again as he thought how wonderful this night had been and wished it could go on forever.

When the last note died away Harry experienced a loss when he finally had to let go of Ginny to clap for the band. Then he took her hand and they followed Ron and Hermione out of the great hall. As they made their way up to Gryffindor tower Ron kept looking back at Harry and Ginny who were walking much slower than normal.

"Come on you two." Ron paused, waiting for them.

"Ron, I think Ginny and I know our way back to the common room. You and Hermione go on." Harry glared at Ron. The red-head realized what was going on. Ron grabbed Hermione's hand and hurried on. Hermione gave Harry a grin as she was pulled along.

"My brother is so thick at times." Ginny mused.

"Yeah but he eventually gets the point." Harry said. They walked along in silence for until they reached the seventh floor. Harry pulled

her the opposite way from the fat lady's portrait. "I want to say goodnight here. So Ron won't freak out."

"Okay." Ginny said softly and followed him down the corridor and around the corner. Harry stopped and took her other hand.

"Ginny, thank you for the best night I've ever had." Harry leaned closer. "It was such a fun time."

"I had a wonderful time too Harry." Ginny leaned closer too. "I promise not to giggle this time."

A smile flickered on Ginny's lips as Harry kissed them and he carefully drew her into his arms. By the time Harry was finished kissing her, both were rather breathless and neither smiled but gazed amazed at each other at the feelings the kiss invoked. Reluctantly Harry and Ginny released their embrace and walked slowly toward Gryffindor tower.

Chapter 27

In the morning Harry awoke wondering why he felt so happy. Then he remembered the dance and even more important the kiss. He sighed then shook himself for feeling like a sentimental sap. It was only a kiss after all. But his mind couldn't help adding, but what a kiss.

Harry packed his trunk and charmed the runespoor carrier to keep the serpent warm for the trip to Grimmauld Place. Ron roused grumbling about the noise Harry was making. "You better get moving too. The train leaves at eleven and it's nine now." Harry pulled the covers off Ron.

"Why are you so cheerful this morning?" Ron rolled out of bed and went to his trunk. When Harry didn't answer Ron looked at him closely. "Why are you blushing Harry?" Ron smirked.

"No reason. I've just been running around gathering everything up for the train ride." Harry recovered and made a project of checking the lock on his trunk.

"I suppose when we go down for breakfast, Ginny is going to be in the same silly mood." Ron muttered, throwing things into his trunk. "Why don't you go on and get the worst of it over with." He shooed Harry away. "That way it won't be too sickening sweet when Hermione and I get down there."

"Please." Harry snorted heading for the stairs. "I can't be as bad as you were when you and Hermione first got together." He hurried down the steps thinking of Ginny. The common room was noisy with students saying Happy Christmas to those they wouldn't see over the holiday. But Harry heard a frantic voice, frantic but familiar.

"Cleo come here." Ginny was on her knees looking under a sideboard. "Here kitty kitty."

"Not again?" Harry knelt beside her.

"Yes, she right there can you reach her?" Ginny pointed.

"You want me to stick my hand under there and just pull her out?" Harry didn't like the sound of that. Cleo had proven many times her claws' swipes were quick and sharp. Ginny gazed at him with out speaking. "Ah, right." Harry steeled himself and started to reach under the dresser. For a small cat, the noise coming from the corner sounded like it could have been made by several large lions fighting. "Cleo? Want to go for a fly?" Harry coaxed as he felt fur. Immediately the kitten scampered into his hands, purring. Harry sighed with relief. "I owe you one spy cat." He handed her to Ginny.

"Thanks." Ginny grinned. "I better go put her in her carrier. Wait for me?"

"Sure." Harry smiled back as he watched her hurry up the girls' stairs. Hermione came down and grinned at him. The smile on Harry's face faded when he began to wonder how much Ginny had told Hermione. Probably everything, that's what girls do, isn't it? He thought.

"Morning Harry." Hermione said too innocently.

"Good Morning Hermione." Harry stared back at her.

"Wonderful dance last night." Hermione said.

"Yes, quite enjoyable." Harry agreed wondering what Hermione was fishing for.

"Ginny had a good time." Hermione commented.

"I'm glad." Harry sighed. "Hermione is there something you wanted to ask me or are you really just making small talk?"

"What ever would I ask you Harry?" Hermione eyes opened with mock surprise.

"Ron will be down shortly." Harry decided to ignore the whole thing. "He's really worried about visiting at your house."

"He can be so pathetic." Hermione looked toward the boys' stairs. "But I'm sure once he gets to my house he'll calm down and have a good time."

"I'm sure." Harry agreed. Thankfully Ginny came back and then Ron came thumping down into the common room.

"Come on let's get something to eat. I'm starved." Ron said without preamble.

When the four crossed the entry way to the great hall, Professor McGonagall called to them. "Potter, Miss Granger, the four of you, a word if you please." She gestured toward the room off the entry. Harry followed without misgivings but noticed the worried look on Ron's face.

"What is it Professor?" Harry asked when she had closed the door behind them.

"The headmaster feels the train is too risky for you four, after the attack in September. So he has arranged port keys to take you to Grimmauld Place." McGonagall told them.

"I was planning to spend the Holiday with Hermione's family." Ron said quickly. "But if it's too much trouble to change the plans I understand."

"No problem at all Mr. Weasley." Dumbledore entered the room carrying two teacups.

"Oh good. I wouldn't want to miss visiting with the Grangers." Ron did an admirable job hiding his disappointment, Harry thought.

"Professor, what about our luggage?" Ginny asked.

"It will be sent on the train. Alastor Moody will collect it and bring it to where you are staying." Dumbledore told them. Ginny nodded.

"What about my runespoor?" Harry just remembered. "I cast a warming charm on her carrier but it's going to need replenished during the trip. She can't stand the cold."

"Mmm. I did not consider you would be taking her with you. But no matter, she can take the port key with you." Dumbledore said.

"When are we going?" Ron's stomach rumbled and he glanced at the door.

"Certainly your departure can be made after breakfast Mr. Weasley." Dumbledore chuckled. He waved his hand toward the door. "Go eat then come back here when you are finished. Harry a moment in my office, if you please."

Harry knew the purpose of his visit to the headmaster's office. Dumbledore wanted another memory from him. It took Harry all the self control he had not to ask the old wizard what he had thought about his first day with the Dursley. But Harry had made a promise to himself not to ask or give an opinion about the days until Dumbledore had finished all three.

Explaining a port key to a runespoor proved to be difficult. The serpent did understand they would be leaving Hogwarts and insisted the shield be placed in the crate with her. All three heads questioned him incessantly as Harry floated the carrier down the many steps to the room off the entryway.

"Is everyone ready?" Dumbledore asked when Harry came in with the hissing crate.

"As ready as we will every be." Harry sighed then he hissed at the runespoor to be quiet for a moment. He looked back to the others. "She doesn't understand about port keys. But let's go."

"Have a Happy Christmas!" Hermione gave Ginny a hug then Harry. Ginny hug her brother and Harry noticed a mist in her eyes. She's

going to miss him for Christmas. He thought. Harry shook hands with Ron and gave him an encouraging slap on the shoulder.

"You'll be fine. Happy Christmas." Harry said.

"Yeah, Happy Christmas." Ron stepped toward the teacup Dumbledore held out for Hermione and him. Ron took the cup and Hermione placed a finger on it.

"One two three." Dumbledore counted. The pair disappeared. Harry sighed and heard Ginny sniff a little.

"Now it is your turn." Dumbledore held out the blue teacup. Ginny took it as Harry picked up the carrier in left hand and touched it with his right. "One, two, three."

The familiar hook behind the navel jerked him forward in a rush of sound and color. A bump from a soft shoulder told Harry Ginny was beside him. The dim kitchen of Grimmauld Place erupted around them. The teacup fell to the stone floor and shattered. The weight of the runespoor's crate made Harry over correct and he stumbled dropping the carrier. With a loud crack the wooden box split and a spitting head emerged followed by two more very angry serpent heads.

"Ginny! Harry!" Mrs. Weasley rushed forward to hug them but then screamed and pulled her wand. "A snake!"

"Wait, Mrs. Weasley she's with me." Harry turned trying to calm the runespoor down. All three were very angry with him, calling him all sorts of rude snake names.

"Get back Harry! It's a runespoor!" Mrs. Weasley screeched pulling Ginny away. "A servant of evil wizards." She shot a stunning spell at the serpent which bounced away before making contact but only served to make the creature angrier.

"Stop! Mrs. Weasley." Harry shouted back. He put his body in front of the coiling runespoor.

"Mom Stop!" Ginny grabbed her wand arm and pulled it down. "It's okay. She's won't hurt anyone."

"It's yours?" Mrs. Weasley stood shaking and glared at Harry.

"Yes, it was in my mom's trunk." Harry put an arm around the runespoor's thick body.

"I won't have!" Mrs. Weasley stepped back as the serpent curled its way up Harry. "I won't have it in my...." Her face fell and tears sprang to her eyes. "It's a vile evil creature Harry and you'll have to decide it's either us or it. I will not have my family near it."

Harry's mouth dropped open and he stared at Mrs. Weasley. He had thought he was part of the Weasley family. He swallowed and turned to face the runespoor. He pleaded with it to be quiet. "Mrs. Weasley do you think I'm evil?" He closed his eyes when no response came.

"Mom, how can you think that? Harry has saved my life three times and yours and Dad's too" Ginny defended.

"And I tried to kill Ron." Harry said hoarsely not turning around. "That's it isn't Mrs. Weasley?"

"No, no." Mrs. Weasley whispered. "It's just... you arguing with Dumbledore and talking to you-know-how...that snake and you talking parseltongue to it."

Slowly Harry turned to face Mrs. Weasley. There was a look in her eyes he had never seen before, utter terror. Barely able to speak Harry said. "I'll take her upstairs and wait for someone to make a port key back to Hogwarts." The runespoor draped around him, Harry pushed the kitchen door open and headed up the stairs to the room he had used over the summer.

His hands shook as Harry took the loops of the runespoor off of him and placed her on his bed. Tears started down his cheeks and he wiped them away. A pressure in his chest made him feel like he was suffocating. Nothing the Dursley had ever done to him had hurt this bad. He was never a part of the Dursleys' family Harry had always

known that. But Mrs. Weasley had made him a part of hers. Or was it all a lie?

"Harry?" Remus opened the door. "Are you alright? Ginny told me what happened."

"I need a port key back to Hogwarts." Harry didn't turn around and managed to say it without emotion. "I'll just stay there. I don't want to ruin anyone's holiday." He stroked Hapa head.

"Molly hates snakes, any not just yours." Remus put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "She doesn't hate you."

"No," Harry turned to face him. "It's worse than that. She's afraid of me." His voice choked and he turned away gripping on to the bed post. "I have never seen that look before. Not from her."

"Harry, she was scared before you came." Remus put an arm around Harry. "Percy is missing."

"What?" Harry turned wiping his face. "What do you mean?"

"When Percy left his job at the ministry we were keeping an eye on him." Remus shook his head. "No, he hasn't gone over to Voldemort side. I think he was ashamed to face people. So we gave him the space and time he needed to come back to his family." He sighed. "Last Monday, we lost all trace of him."

"What do you think has happened?" Harry asked.

"We just don't know. His place in London still has some of his things in it. But some personal things are missing. Like he might have packed and left." Remus sighed. "Harry, give Molly some time. She'll come around. When we first met, Molly treated me very coolly."

"I never expected something like this. Not from Mrs. Weasley." Harry blinked and swallowed.

"Molly's under a lot of strain. Not being able to go back to the Burrow." Lupin nodded at the look on Harry's face. "Yes, the death

eaters are still watching the house. With Percy missing and now a snake, she just hit her limit Harry. Let me go talk to her." Remus patted him on the back. "Believe me Harry, once she realizes what she has said to you she'll come up here and apologize." Harry shrugged.

After Lupin left Harry still hung on to the bedpost, waiting for the pressure in his chest to go away. In his mind he kept seeing the Mrs. Weasley's face filled with fear, of him. Harry added. Tears welled up in his eyes. How could she do that to him? His hand shook as he brushed away the tears on his cheek. Would she want to take the hand with his name on it off her clock? A knot in his stomach joined the weight on him. Sinking on to the bed, he leaned his face against the pole and hung on with both hands.

"Harry?" Ginny's soft voice came from the door. Then he felt her arms wrap him.

"Better go, Ginny, your mom won't want you here with me." Harry said hoarsely.

"I can't believe she said those things to you." Ginny raged. "That wasn't mom. You know that don't you?" Harry shrugged, not trusting his voice. "Harry, she'll be sorry she said those things. Really."

Struggling to keep back his tears, Harry tried to pull away from Ginny but she wouldn't let him. "Ginny, I just need some time alone." Harry whispered. Mrs. Weasley's face flashed through his mind again. "Please."

"No, I'm not leaving. You spend too much time alone when you're hurting." Ginny said just holding him tighter. Harry put his head on her shoulder and his arms went around her waist.

"I can't believe how much it hurts, what she said." Harry whispered. "She never treated me any different before." He choked as his voice tightened. Ginny gripped him tighter and rubbed his back.

For a long time they sat like a statue. Harry tried hard to get control of his emotions. The arms around him just reminded him, the first

comforting hug he had received was from Mrs. Weasley. The runespoor slid over to the pair and entwined its coils around them, laying its heads on their shoulders.

Mr. Weasley found Harry and Ginny like that when he entered the room. My word!" He stopped short. They tried to release each other but the serpent held them fast

"What are you doing?" Harry asked the runespoor.

"Protecting thee master and thy mate." Kesho answered, flicking her tongue in his ear.

A warm flush crept up Harry's face. "Ah, well, talk about that later. Please let us go." The runespoor slithered back on to the bed and Harry let go of Ginny. "It's okay Mr. Weasley. I didn't hurt her."

"I can see that." Mr. Weasley said in a strange voice. "Lunch is ready."

"I'm not hungry, thanks." Harry couldn't look up at the man. If he saw the same look in Mr. Weasley's face Harry knew he would loose it. He couldn't risk seeing the fear again. "Go on Ginny, I just need time to think." Harry glanced at her and she nodded, giving his hand a last squeeze.

The weak winter sun barely made it through the dirty windows of Harry's room so when it finally set the difference in light was negligible. He didn't move to light a candle or fire until the runespoor complained about being cold. He wasn't having much success in getting the fire started since he couldn't use magic. But Harry hesitated in going to get someone to light it magically.

"Need some help?" Remus asked after knocking.

"Please?" Harry nodded. "She's cold." In a second Lupin had the fire blazing and the runespoor curled up near by.

"She was in Lily's trunk?" Lupin shook his head. "Where would Lily get such a creature, without telling James?" He frowned.

"That is one of the big questions concerning the trunk." Harry studied Lupin for a moment. "Dumbledore never told you what was in the chest?"

"No, he thought it best if you tell me. He said, unless it was something extremely important that we both should know we should keep what you tell us to ourselves." Remus said. "Dumbledore didn't want it to seem like we were spying on you for each other." He looked closely at Harry.

"Oh." Harry understood the reasoning. "Then he didn't tell you my animagus form?"

"No, he didn't but Molly did. Ginny wrote to her after you saved her from that fall." Remus's eyes opened wide. "A phoenix! Unbelievable." He marveled.

"A Phoenix? You turn into an evil phoenix?" Giza hissed at Harry rising to look into his eyes.

"You know about animagi wizards?" Harry asked. "Calm down. Yes, a phoenix is my other form."

"Yessss, I know of shape shifters." Giza continued to glare at Harry as if looking for the phoenix. "Why did you not tell us?"

"I guess the opportunity to bring up the subject never arrived." Harry shrugged. "Phoenix or not I still command you right?" He thought the serpent might need reminding.

"Yes, master." The three heads said in unison. Then Giza relented. "Phoenix or not I still like you."

"Thanks." Harry grinned as he turned to Lupin to tell him what the runespoor's problem was about. Remus's jaw hung open and his eyes were as wide as Harry had ever seen them. When Lupin realized he was staring he closed his mouth with a snap and shook himself chuckling.

"I must say Harry, I agree with Molly. Listening to parseltongue is unsettling." Remus laughed again. "I guess I better get used to it."

The mention of Mrs. Weasley made the smile disappear from Harry's face. "She's still afraid isn't she?"

"Yes, a bit. Arthur is talking to her. Don't worry Harry she'll come around." Remus assured him.

Closing his eyes Harry tried to think of something else to talk about. "So you knew nothing about the runespoor?"

"No. And not in my wildest dreams did I consider something like the runespoor might be in Lily's trunk." Remus shook his head.

Harry turned to study Lupin again. "Did you know my Mom was a parseltongue?"

"What?" Remus looked taken aback. "No Harry she couldn't have been. We would have known. James..."

"She wrote in her letter she was afraid to tell my Dad." Harry looked around for his school trunk then remembered it wouldn't arrive until later. "She talked to snakes before she ever went to Hogwarts."

A stunned look crossed Remus's face. "I never heard of..." He seemed a bit upset and paced across Harry's room then turned back to him. "Harry, when I first heard you were a parselmouth, I did research on the subject, because I was coming to teach at Hogwarts. It is a rare talent among wizards as you know. But never in any of my searching did I come across a muggle-born parselmouth."

"Then how?" Harry stared at him.

"I have no idea Harry. And I thought I knew Lily fairly well." Remus rubbed his neck. "I wonder if there ever were other muggle-born parselmouths."

"I'll ask." Harry turned to the runespoor and put the question to it.

"Yesss, many. Before the using of the blood, when the children of men talked to all the beasts." Hapa told him. Harry relayed it to Lupin.

"What does she mean the using of blood?" Remus asked thoughtfully.

"When wizard kind was most powerful they were jealous, the children of men could talk to the creatures. It was something wizards could not do." Hapa started answering before Harry could ask. "Wizards used the children of men's blood to bring these powers to them." Harry told Remus.

"When was this time?" Lupin asked.

"After I left my egg and I heard many of these tales from the great serpent of Manitar, who was at that time as thick as I am now. If he still lives, he would be of great girth now." Hapa said admiringly.

"Interesting." Remus said when Harry relayed the message. "You know Harry; we should really make a record of all the tales this runespoor can tell us. The amount of knowledge she must have." Remus froze as the runespoor slipped forward and bumped Lupin on the cheek with each great orange head.

Harry laughed. "I think she likes you. You are properly humbled by her intelligence."

"That I am." Remus laughed a little relieved the serpent had pulled back. "While you're on holiday, we can get several stories...." A shriek came up from downstairs. "Molly?"

Both Harry and Remus ran to the hall. The scream had set off the portrait of Sirius's mother and Lupin tugged the drapery back across it. Then they raced down the stairs. A strangled wailing sound made a knot in Harry's stomach. They burst into a crowded kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley clung on to a red-haired man, sobbing. Mr. Weasley looked tense but relieved as he looked on at his son, Percy. Ginny, Charlie, Bill with Fred and George gazed at their brother with mixed emotions. Albus Dumbledore had taken a seat to wait out the family

reunion. Moody and Mundungus looked on with stern faces as did Kingsley Shacklebolt and Tonks.

"Percy!" Remus sighed. "Thank Merlin!"

"No Remus, Thank Professor Dumbledore." Mr. Weasley said quietly.

Finally Mrs. Weasley let go of her son and Percy glanced at the people around him. He didn't look like the pompous strict head boy Harry had known at Hogwarts. The tattered robes and broken glasses wasn't the reason though, it was the look in Percy face that had changed. The brown eyes reflected fear and look of absolute humility.

Nobody spoke for a moment. Then Dumbledore cleared his throat. "We are all glad you are not hurt Percy, but this is not my house so the decision to let you stay here doesn't rest with me." The old wizard looked at Harry and Lupin. "That rests upon Remus and Harry's shoulders."

Harry and Remus exchanged glances. There was no doubt in Harry's mind that Remus would let Percy stay. And sure enough Lupin spoke. "I have no objections." Then all eyes looked to Harry.

The air in the kitchen felt over used with so many people standing waiting for Harry's judgment. He stared at Percy thinking of all the things this man had said. Percy could barely meet his eyes. Finally the redhead broke the silence. "If you don't want me to stay I'll understand." Percy said. "I really don't blame you Harry." He looked down at the floor.

"I think an apology is in order, don't you?" Harry said grimly and walked around the table closer to him.

Percy looked up. "I'm sorry Harry...I really..."

"Not me you prat!" Harry growled and glanced at Mr. Weasley. "You owe it to your folks."

"Yes, I know." Percy nodded and swallowed then raised his head to meet his father's eyes. "I'm so sorry, Dad, Mom. Everything I said...I

can't begin to take back. Can you ever forgive me?" Tears stood in his eyes and Harry could see him shaking.

"You're my son and you will always be my son." Mr. Weasley held out his hand and as Percy took it engulfed him in a hug. Mrs. Weasley gave a sob and flung her arms around the pair.

Percy pulled away from his parents and looked at his brothers and Ginny. He opened his mouth but Bill stopped him before he could say anything. "Percy you may be the world's biggest git, but you're our git." He held out his hand. Percy took it surprised.

"Yeah, we have to have someone to pick on." Fred said thumping Percy on the back.

"And to make us look good." George shook Percy's hand.

"I suppose, if Mom and Dad can forgive you I can." Charlie was next in line with his hand out.

Ginny just threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "If you ever say anything so stupid again..." She left the warning open as she released him.

"I won't. I promise." Percy laughed nervously. The relief in Percy's face made the tightness in Harry's chest tighter. "Harry, I do owe you an apology. Can you forgive me?"

"You sound very sincere Percy." Harry nodded. "On the other hand, just because you're sorry doesn't mean you should get away without any punishment." A mischievous glint came to Harry's eyes.

"Uh, what kind of punishment?" Percy gulped, looking at his parents then Dumbledore.

"I think a week's detention is reasonable. Don't you think so?" Harry turned and winked at Fred and George.

"Absolutely." Chorused the twins.

"Detention?" Percy questioned. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well, you serve your detention with the people you have wronged." Harry smiled at him and indicating his family.

"Oh I see." Percy looked at the twins with their identical evil grins. He shook his head and laughed. "Okay, I'll take what ever they dish out. I have it coming."

The smile on Fred and George's face vanished. "Ah Perce, you're taking all the fun out of it, giving in like that." George frowned. "And you call yourself a Gryffindor." Fred snorted.

"Now can you forgive me Harry?" Percy held out his hand.

Harry took it and patted his shoulder. "I don't have much experience but I've heard that's what families do; forgive the stupid things they say to one and another. I'm glad you're alright Percy." Harry thought he heard a small sob from Mrs. Weasley. "You can stay as long as you want. You'll be safe here I hope."

"Thanks Harry." Percy sighed blinking hard and he sunk into a chair.

"Let's have some Dinner." Remus clapped his hands. "Everybody's hungry. Molly, what should we feed them?"

Harry didn't look at Mrs. Weasley. "I'm not hungry." The knot in his stomach had come back. "I'll be up in my room." He kept his eyes on the kitchen door as he brushed by Mr. Weasley, who took his arm.

"Molly?" Mr. Weasley's voice was the sternest Harry had ever heard him use to speak to his wife.

"Harry, can you forgive me?" Mrs. Weasley's hand touched his back. Harry blinked. It took all he had not to burst out crying. Slowly he turned to face her.

"Can you forgive me for attacking Ron?" Harry searched her eyes for the fear he had seen before. "Ron has."

"Oh, Harry. I'm sorry I didn't meanI never thought you were evil." Mrs. Weasley tried to explain but her voice choked. "I was just scared."

"I know. But please, don't be afraid of me." Harry pleaded wanting to say more but couldn't so he held out his arms for a hug.

Mrs. Weasley flung her arms around his neck and pulled him close. Harry embraced her furiously. "I'm so sorry Harry." Then she drew back and reached up to kiss his cheek. "You've gotten so much taller." She smiled through her tears. "Sit down. I'll have dinner on the table in a flash."

A smaller hand slipped into his and Harry felt Ginny pull him to sit beside her. He wiped the tears from under his glasses and glanced at the Weasley's brother eyeing the pair of them. The measured stare from all of them made Harry want to laugh.

Ginny put a butterbeer in his hand and Harry took a long drink from the bottle watching the Weasley's as he drank. Fred and George gave each other intense knowing looks. Bill gazed at his little sister with a look of sudden realization, like he just saw she wasn't a little girl anymore. Charlie expression gave the impression the dragon handler wanted to put one of his dragon chains on Harry, just to be safe. Percy was too relieved at being welcomed back to worry about anything else.

Harry saw Dumbledore smile at the four red-haired men. The headmaster must have gone out to locate Percy, Harry thought as he continued to gaze at the old wizard who had leaned over to speak to Moody. Where and how Dumbledore had found Percy nobody seemed in a hurry to ask the headmaster any details.

Presently Dumbledore stood up. "I'm sorry Molly. I must be getting back to Hogwarts." He gave a significant look at Harry.

"But you must eat." Mrs. Weasley insisted. "At least take a piece of pie with you." She hurried off and soon came back with a wrapped pie. "I put in a piece for Minerva."

"She'll be delighted, thank you Molly." Dumbledore gave a slight bow and with a loud crack he was gone.

The pensive gave an odd light as Dumbledore stirred the contents with his wand. When he found the memory he was searching for the old wizard stopped and leaned forward to touch the silver substance.

A bright classroom materialized around Dumbledore. Six children stood in a row at the front of the class. Four girls and two boys, appearing to be about seven, took turns spelling words the teacher gave them as she sat at the back of the class.

"Your turn Harry. Spell 'picture'." The teacher said. Some of the class snickered as the small dark haired boy with taped glass and very baggy clothes stepped forward.

"Picture, p-i-c-t-u-r-e, picture." Harry nodded his head slightly with each letter.

"Correct. Good Harry." The teacher told him.

"Dumbledore smiled and sat at an empty desk as Harry grinned and stepped back inline. The old wizard glanced around to see Dudley whispering to two boys and shooting threatening looks at Harry. The spelling bee continued. Harry advanced until only he and a blond-haired girl remained.

"Our finalists. The words are going to be harder now so think carefully before answering." The teacher told them. "Audrey spell, beggar."

"Beggar, b-e-g-g-e-r, beggar." The girl smiled confidently.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry that's incorrect." The teacher said. "Harry it's your turn. If you can spell beggar, you win."

Harry ignored the whispers about looking like a beggar, stepped forward tripping a little on the cuff of his too long pants and said. "Beggar, b-e-g-g-a-r, beggar."

"Correct. Very good Harry." The teacher clapped and gave a quick glare to the other students to do the same as she walked to the front of the class.

Dumbledore smiled and Harry grinned widely when the teacher handed him a silky blue ribbon.

"Excellent job Harry. Please take your seat." The teacher patted the dark haired boy on the back as he passed her. All through the rest of the school day Dumbledore noticed Harry kept a tight grip on the ribbon and one eye on Dudley. As soon as the lessons were over Harry bolted from the classroom, Dumbledore in his wake with Dudley and his friends close behind. Harry ran all out and never looked behind him at the loudly thudding footfalls. Only the magic of the pensive made it possible for Dumbledore to keep up with the small boy when he squeezed between the gap in a hedge row and under a wire chain link fence afterwards.

But Harry must have used this path once too often. When he emerged into an alley Dudley and his two chums were waiting for him. The two boys grabbed Harry's arms, holding him tightly, while Dudley punched Harry many times.

"Where's the ribbon?" Dudley finally asked then started fishing into Harry's pockets. "Got it." Dudley laughed, hitting Harry again. "You know what I found out?" Dudley put his face in to Harry's and spat on his glasses. "Your parents are still alive. Yeah," Dudley smirked as Harry's eyes flew open. "Yeah, but they're both drug addicts and are rotting in prison for selling drugs and murdering a policeman."

"No, you're lying." Harry struggled against the tight hold.

"They dumped you off on my parents because they couldn't stand your stinking face." Dudley spat at Harry again. Then he gave the two boys a nod and they released Harry. Dudley shoved him hard to the ground and began to kick him. "Mum will be so proud of me when she sees I've won the spelling bee." Dudley gave one last kick at Harry's back and ran off with his buddies.

For a long time Harry lay in the gravel alley not moving. Dumbledore hurried over to help but then remembered this was only a memory. Slowly Harry raised himself from the dust and sat with his knee up and his head in his hands. Silent tears streaked his dirty face and blood trickled from the cut on his lip.

Suddenly Dumbledore stood in the Dursleys' spotless kitchen. Aunt Petunia gripped Harry by the ear as she screamed at him. "Look at you! Dirt all over! And you wonder why we don't buy you nice clothes? Just look at the mess you made of these." She shook his ear, effectively shaking Harry's whole body. "Get out of those things. NO!" She shrieked. "Don't go traipsing through the house again. Take them off in the laundry room." She gave him a shove in that direction.

Wincing Harry unbuttoned his shirt and put it in the washer. Dumbledore watched as Harry turned around and gasped when he saw the boy's back. Not including the huge purpling mark which Dudley had inflicted on him, Harry's back showed at least a dozen strap marks and an old yellowing bruise the size of a large fist. Frowning Dumbledore saw Harry unfasten his belt and his baggy pants dropped with out him having to undo the front. The too big underwear was held up by the elastic being cut and tied.

The Memory faded and Dumbledore now saw the family at the dinner table once again. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon fussed over Dudley's stolen blue ribbon. Harry made no sound or any move to correct their notion it was Dudley's. He kept his eyes down and ate his meal. Even at the young age of seven Harry knew better than to say anything against his bigger cousin.

The scene changed again. Dumbledore felt the stifling heat in the small cupboard, where Harry lay sweating on his cot, even though he wore only thin underpants. Hour after hour passed with Harry moving only to press his ear to the door of the cupboard, listening. His chin on his hands, Dumbledore looked on in utter shock as he sat on the edge of Harry's bed for uncounted hours.

A car door slammed. Happy voices laughed and talked as the Dursleys came in the front door. Harry sat up sweaty and tired. But he didn't bang on the cupboard door demanding to be let out. Again

he waited and listened. The cheerful chatting went into the kitchen. When Dumbledore thought he could stand no more of this Harry timidly rapped at the door.

"Uncle Vernon? Aunt Petunia?" Harry's voice rasped. "I'm thirsty could I get a drink of water?" The talk stopped then Uncle Vernon's heavy footsteps came to the cupboard door. The latch clicked open.

"Be quick about it boy. Phew, you stink. Go up and take a shower." Uncle Vernon waved Harry away from him. "You have five minutes." Harry rushed up the stairs and into the bathroom. Not bothering to take off his sweat soaked underpants, Harry stood under the shower stream gulping the water as it cooled his body. The five minutes passed quickly and Uncle Vernon shouted up the stairs for Harry to go back to his cupboard. Barely drying himself, Harry hurriedly slipped back into the cupboard under the stairs and onto his bed.

Dumbledore returned to his office. Grief deep in his lined face reflected off the case which held the sword of Gryffindor. A lump in his throat the old wizard rose wearily from his desk. Slowly he went to the fireplace, gave it a tap with his wand and entered his bed chambers. Changing into a long white nightshirt Dumbledore sat in his bed staring at the wall a long time before blowing out the candle on his bedside table and laying his head on the pillow.

Author's notes: Thanks for the reviews. I hope you didn't get any cavities from that last chapter.

Someone asked about the year of Harry's birth and all that. He was born July 31, 1980. I get all my info from this website. They have the time line all figured out. It is a bit confusing because Rowling isn't consistent or correct with the calendar days, like Sept. 1st seemingly always on a Monday. But I at least can overlook such things, given the enjoyment I have from her stories.

Chapter 28

Ginny jumped up and started helping her mother and Remus with dinner. Harry followed her with his eyes until he saw Mr. Weasley looking at him with a thoughtful expression on his face. Harry felt his face heat up so he got up to get dishes from the sideboard. He placed a stack of plates on the table and turned to get bowls.

"What's this?" Remus asked stooping to pick up a package near his foot. A fleeting glance Harry saw a soft leather wrapper,

"Don't touch it!" Harry shouted pulling Remus away from the bundle. At the same instance a long length of orange coils striped in black and three hissing heads appeared next to the parcel.

Mrs. Weasley screamed. Several shouts echoed through the cavernous kitchen. Two yells of stupefy rang out. Harry jumped in front of the runespoor as if to protect it but the spells bounced away from both the serpent and Harry.

"Calm down!" Harry shouted. "All of you. Be quiet for a moment." When finally all but Mrs. Weasley, who was trying to get as far away from the runespoor as possible, fell silent Harry turned to speak to the serpent.

"Why are you here?" Harry asked.

"To protect the shield as I am bound." The three orange heads answered.

"Right." Harry sighed and picked up the wrapped shield. "Could you go back up stairs? You're kind of scaring people. I'll bring the shield up."

"As long as a snake talker has the shield they need not fear me." Giza looked straight at Mrs. Weasley who cringed against her husband.

"Harry please. Make it go away." Mrs. Weasley begged. "I'm sorry, I really hate snakes."

"I am no snake." Hapa now looked at the frightened woman too.

"Come on let's go back up stairs. Hey, don't". Harry tried to grab the slick side of the thick body but his hands slipped off. The runespoor gazed at each red head in turn. She stopped at Percy and stared long and hard with each of her heads. Percy began to feel intimidated by the prolonged gaze. "Harry, is there anything wrong?"

"I'll find out." Harry said but before he could ask the runespoor spoke.

"I have seen this face before." Hapa hissed. "Long long ago." The head looked around at the other red haired people. "The head fur was dark but the face is the same. A wizard who drank the blood potion of men so he could speak to me, he possessed the shield for many years."

"What do you mean? Percy isn't old." Harry said after translating Hapa's words.

"SSSittt. I will tell thee the time of Wes Sly. Speak my words to them." The runespoor nudge Harry to a seat. "Listen well, all ye wizards and witches. This is thy story." Hapa watched and waited as everyone took a seat looking both confused and expectant. Harry carefully translated the runespoor tale as it was told.

"Long ago, when wizard kind ruled all the world, there lived one of the most powerful of wizards, Wes Sly. Powerful and cruel, in his domain, Wes Sly reigned over a great area of land and magical beings. He was feared above all the other wizards or witches in his realm." There was an uneasy shifting among the Weasleys as the serpent continued.

"The wizards of this time used the sons and daughters of men as beasts. To do with what they wished whether it be for labor or for body parts. This is when the wizards and witches they could only talk to beasts by the way of the blood of men."

"Nice thing to talk about just before we eat." Tonks wrinkled her nose. The runespoor hissed at her and she fell silent.

"Wes Sly as I said ruled his land with no mercy. All who saw him feared his temper. One day he came across a daughter of man gathering rushes for her bed. He had never seen a flame haired daughter of man before and knew them to be quite rare. When the maiden turned she did not, as Wes Sly expected fall at his feet in terror as other would have done, but gazed at him with out fear, and most important with out loathing in her brown eyes." The runespoor waited a moment for Harry to translate and then continued.

"Who are you?" Wes Sly demanded.

"I am Moyo daughter of ..."

"Do I care of the breeding of beasts?" The wizard roared trying to frighten the girl. But the daughter of man knew no fear and merely looked reproachful at Wes Sly for his rudeness. Never before had anyone not feared him. Wes Sly drew his wand to teach this girl, this impenitent girl, fear but even that action brought no terror in her eyes.

Wes Sly found he could not hurt her. He could not bring himself to cast a spell against such innocence. A different desire started to burn in the wizard's mind and he bade her to come with him to be his concubine. But Moyo refused saying she would be no wizard's plaything. Powerful wizard he was, but he had not the power to force her.

Many days Wes Sly returned to talk to the daughter of man. Until one day he asked Moyo what she wished from him.

"Only one thing do I seek from thee." Moyo said. "Bring me this one little thing and you will have what you desire."

Many years past, Wes Sly brought Moyo riches beyond imagination, jewels the size of eggs and gold piled at her feet as the years past but Moyo shook her head with every treasure Wes Sly tried to give her. Then after twenty three years of searching, Wes Sly came to kneel at Moyo's feet.

"I have nothing to give this time." The great wizard bowed his head. "I have nothing to give to thee but my heart, Moyo."

"With your gift to me, I also give thee my heart." Moyo laid her hand on the wizard's cheek. As the great Wes Sly looked into the ageless eyes of the flame haired daughter of man, he finally understood.

In the name of love, Wes Sly wed Moyo and for the first time the blood of wizard and a daughter of man mixed with love not pain. The wizards of the world rose against Wes Sly for such blasphemy. Powerful as Wes Sly was, he could not fight against the whole might of the wizarding world. So Wes Sly and Moyo fled into the wilds. Living with the creatures Moyo could ask for help.

In time Wes Sly became the master of a small land but ruled instead with kindness and compassion as taught to him by Moyo's heart. And so, all of their children and all their children's children's beyond count were marked by the flame hair of Moyo in tribute to the first wizard who truly knew love."

Hapa reached out and touched Percy's hair. "And so the blood of love still flows in the hearts of wizards. It is good to see. There is hope for all."

"That is an amazing story." Remus marveled. "Thanks you for sharing that."

Mr. Weasley cleared his throat. "Yes, thank you." He looked inquiringly at Harry.

"Hapa told the tale." Harry smiled as the serpent seemed to swell with pride with the proper gratitude being shown to her.

"Ah, Hapa. Thank you. Yes, I do believe the blood of love, as you call it flows in my family." Mr. Weasley laid a hand on Harry's shoulder to include him.

"Hapa says you are quite welcome." Harry said. "She's going off to hunt." As the great serpent pushed the door open easily and slipped out of the kitchen.

There was a sigh of relief from Mrs. Weasley. Without a word she hurriedly set dinner on the table. And for a short time everybody attended to the fine meal before them. Not having any lunch Harry was very hungry. When he finally looked up from eating to take a drink Harry saw Mad-Eye Moody watching him, with both eyes.

"What's in that package, Potter?" Moody real eye narrowed a bit.

"What? Can't you see?" Harry stared back at the old Auror.

"That must be one powerful blind charm for my eye not to see through that wrapping." Moody told him. "So what's that serpent guarding?"

"What do you mean?" Harry dropped his gaze to his plate.

"Come off it boy. I didn't buy my first wand yesterday." Moody growled.

"Perhaps Harry doesn't want to tell you." Remus said, glancing at Harry.

"To tell you the truth, I don't." Harry nodded his thanks to Remus. The Auror continued to look intently at Harry with mounting distrust.

"Fine, but you just keep an eye on that runespoor. They can't be trusted." Moody snarled.

"And since when are you an expert on runespoors? And how many of them have you talked to?" Harry responded hotly.

"I wouldn't be caught dead talking to one of those things." Moody glared back at Harry.

"She told me wizards could never talk to any creature because their minds are closed." Harry didn't flinch at the scarred face's scowl. "I can see now what she means."

"Mark my words. That thing will hurt someone. It's only a matter of time." Moody gave a terse nod of his shaggy head and went back to eating. When the old Auror had finished he thanked Mrs. Weasley for the meal and left with Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Don't think anything of what Mad-Eye said, Harry." Tonks said when they had left. "You know how he is, sees dark creatures in everything."

"Yeah, I know." Harry nodded then sighed. "But many wizards feel the same way he does about runespoors."

"I liked her story." Ginny smiled at Harry. "I wonder if it is true."

"If Kesho had told the story I would wonder too but Hapa doesn't have an imagination." Harry told her as he dug into the piece of pie Mrs. Weasley had set in front of him.

"So you really think that happened?" Fred asked skeptically.

"Yes." Harry nodded. "She remembered." He stopped. Harry almost told them of Giza killing Dumbledore's father but then thought better of it. "She remembered stuff Dumbledore can confirm." He said instead.

"Wes Sly?" Ginny tested the name. "Could the name have been changed to Weasley?" Her eyes grew large at the thought.

"That's what it sounds like to me." Harry nodded and gazed at the other red heads around the table, considering. "The blood lives on." Harry agreed quietly, giving a gentle smile to Mrs. Weasley.

When Harry crawled into bed he thought about the strange day. Even though Mrs. Weasley had apologized, Harry still felt unsettled by her initial fear. The runespoor laid by the fire Remus had stoked to last the night. Harry watched the firelight shimmer off her shiny orange scales thinking she looked as if bathed in blood as he drifted off to sleep. In the middle of the night, Harry awoke with a slight prickling in

his scar. He waited for it to calm down but instead the irritation seemed to intensify. "Not tonight." He mumbled trying to ignore the pain and go back to sleep.

After lying awake for a half hour Harry thought he'd go down to the kitchen for some tea, hoping it would sooth his headache. As he pushed the kitchen door open, Harry heard a scrapping of chairs. At the table sat Remus and Tonks looking around at him as he entered.

"Harry? Anything wrong?" Remus asked concerned.

"Just a headache. Thought a cup of tea might help." Harry walked over to the teapot on the stove.

"It's hot, just help yourself." Tonks said in a very strange voice.

"You haven't been talking to Voldemort?" Remus looked intently at Harry.

"No. I didn't even try tonight. I was too tired to go there." Harry paused to take a sip and over the rim of his teacup he glanced at Remus, next to the man's lips was a pink smudge. The same shade of pink as the lipstick Tonks happened to be wearing. Harry choked on the tea and coughed. Tea splashed down the front of his pajamas and Harry turned to wipe it off at the sink fighting hard not to burst out laughing.

"Alright Harry?" Remus asked.

"Ah fine." Harry managed without laughing. "Went down the wrong pipe." He poured another cup and drank a bit before turning around, fighting all the while to keep from smiling. "So, what are you two up to?" Harry bit the inside of his lip to keep a sober face.

"Just talking." Tonks said brightly.

"Just shooting the breeze." Remus nodded and opened his mouth to say more but then shut it as if he couldn't think of anything to say.

"Better be careful." Harry said seriously. "I heard that can be dangerous." Remus and Tonks gave him a puzzled look. Harry set his teacup on the table and leaned across to wipe the lipstick from Remus's face. "Shooting the breeze? It seems a little bit of blood splattered, Remus." Harry grinned. Lupin slapped Harry's hand away and a deep flush rose in the man's face.

"Get back to bed you." Remus growled. Tonks had dissolved into snickers leaning against Lupin.

"Okay, I'll go." Harry laughed. "Just remember, we eat on this table." He shot back as he pushed through the door. A teacup crashed against the door frame and Harry wondered whether Remus or Tonks had tossed it at him.

Author's notes: Thanks for the reviews!!!

They keep me and my ten clumsy fingers pecking away. This is a shorter chapter than norm but the story took another turn that I had to stop and reconsider things.

I addressed spelling issues in my author's notes at the bottom of chapter 23 Quidditch. If I went back to correct all the spelling and grammar the story would never move on. So I won't comment on this again. ;oP

It's a damn poor mind that can only think of one way to spell a word:
Andrew Jackson

Chapter 29

A shrill twittering woke Harry the next morning. He rubbed his eyes and reached for his glasses then ducked as a small owl whizzed close to his head. "Come here." Said Harry as he put his glasses on and coaxed the tiny owl down. After taking the letter from around his leg the owl zoomed off again. The letter was from Ron.

"Hi Harry,

You were right. The muggle house isn't so bad. Hermione's parents have been really great. They think I'm so polite, it's making Hermione roll her eyes so much I think they'll get stuck that way.

The Grangers spent most of the day showing me how to work these electrical things. (I had to have Hermione spell that for me.) Actually I used to think it was a little dangerous but it isn't really. But I guess you know that.

Mrs. Granger wouldn't let me help with anything being the first day and all. So Hermione and I watched Television. WOW!! Never even dreamed of anything like it! And we watched a moovy, Miracle on 34th Street. It was about this little girl in America who didn't believe in Father Christmas and how she learned to believe magical things can happen to people. I'll tell you the whole story when I see you. I'll probably see a lot more by then anyway. You never really talked of these moovy things before so I don't know if you have ever seen any.

Tomorrow we are going shopping in muggle London. Should be interesting, I should have borrowed your camera so I could get some pictures for Dad.

I'll write more as the days go on. Hermione says hi!

Ron"

Harry smiled then sighed. It was going to be a strange Christmas without Ron and Hermione, Harry thought. After getting dressing he took the letter down to the kitchen to show it to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Mr. Weasley's eyes grew enviously as he read about his son enjoying

muggle things. His wife just gave him a 'don't you even think about it' look when Mr. Weasley mentioned he would like to see a movie some day.

Mr. Weasley left for his job at the Ministry of Magic. Percy came down for breakfast with Lupin, Bill and Charlie. Fred and George came in behind them. The twins kept glancing at Percy and whispering to each other. Tonks and Ginny arrived for breakfast next and gave everyone a cheerful "Good Morning".

"So Percy, you are going to help us at the joke shop today?" Fred asked pausing from eating his porridge.

"Sure, I'm on detention aren't I?" Percy gave a rueful smile to Harry. "Ah, I will have all my extremities when I'm finished?"

"For the most part." George nodded. "If not we'll fix them back on better than before." Everybody laughed except Percy who sighed resignedly. Mrs. Weasley sat down next to Percy and leaned against him as if to make sure he was really there. Harry saw Ginny eyeing the two thoughtfully.

"Percy you never did say where you were. Are you going to tell us?" Ginny asked then seemed a little taken aback by the furtive looks the adults gave each other.

After a long moment Percy finally answered. "I was at the Burrow." He glanced at his mother who gave his arm a squeeze. "I was going to send a letter to Mom and Dad but what I had to say to them needed to be done faced to face." He sighed. "So I took a little time to get up the courage and then apparated to the Burrow. But no one was there and when I tried to disapparate out I couldn't"

"Why not?" Ginny gasped.

"The Death Eaters must have put an anti-disapparating charm on the house." Remus said then added. "Actually, I suspect it was placed to capture your father and mother and to use anyone else who happened to get trapped as bait for them."

"But why Mom and Dad?" Ginny asked in a scared voice.

Lupin smiled gently. "I know it's hard to see your parents in another light but they are two very powerful witch and wizard. And Voldemort knows they are close to Dumbledore and Harry." Remus glanced at Molly who seemed determine not to say anything. "Actually Percy springing the trap was a good thing. Your father was considering going back to the Burrow for some items and if he had..."

"Don't give me credit for doing anything noble, Remus." Percy said sullenly. "I had no idea."

"Never the less, it saved your parents life in my opinion." Lupin said.

"How did Dumbledore get Percy out?" Harry asked.

"We knew the Death Eaters were watching the Burrow. And we were watching the Death Eaters." Tonks explained. "When Percy attempted to leave the Burrow, the Death Eaters knew it was Percy not Arthur or Molly. So they were waiting for someone to come looking for him. We knew someone was inside but not really who."

"So several of us from the Order distracted the Death Eaters and Dumbledore was able to break through the charm and get Percy out." Remus finished.

"Will we ever be able to go back home?" Ginny asked in a small voice. The silence that followed made her nod in understanding. Harry saw tears standing in Ginny's brown eyes but her jaw was set in an indomitable way. Her brothers gazed at her admiringly; glad she wasn't disheartened by the prospect of not being able to go home. Ginny cleared her throat and with a defiant cheerfulness asked. "What are we going to do today?"

For all of the morning and into the middle of the afternoon, Mrs. Weasley had Harry, Ginny, Charlie and Remus decorating the house for Christmas. When she finally gave them a break every room had tinsel hanging from the ceiling in intricate patterns and boughs of evergreen adorned each mantle.

Harry went up to his room to see if the runespoor had found enough to eat. He sat talking to her for a time until Remus knocked at the door. "Not interrupting am I?"

"No," Harry stroked the broad back of the serpent. "She likes it here. She found lot of rats."

"Don't tell Molly 'lots'." Remus chuckled. "She thinks she had the lot cleared out." He gazed at Harry for a long moment.

"What's up?" Harry returned.

"It's good to know you're about the place." Remus turned away and looked down the desk now strewn with Harry's things. Then Harry knew what was bothering the man.

"Yeah, I miss him too." Harry nodded and moving over to lay a hand on Remus's shoulder. "I'm glad you're around too."

"I didn't come in here to talk about Sirius." Remus said hoarsely. He fingered the edge of the desk chair with one hand and scratched his neck with the other. "Like I said, sometimes it just hits you out of the blue like that."

"I know." Harry nodded giving the man's shoulder a squeeze. "Would you like to see the other things that were in my mom's trunk?" Harry glanced around for any portraits that might spy on them. But all paintings seemed to have been cleared from the room.

Remus turned around smiling. "Yes, I'd like to see what Lily was up to, Harry."

"You can't tell anyone." Harry said as he went to the door and locked it. "Promise?"

"I promise." Lupin said solemnly with his hand in the air.

"Not even if you think someone else should know?" Harry eyed the man carefully as he lifted the small chest out of his school trunk.

"No I won't tell Dumbledore Harry." Remus said. "I promise." He peered with interest at the covered trunk. "How did you finally get it open?"

"One to unlock might

With blood in sight

On Moony's night

The words said right

And a summoned light."

Harry repeated the rhyme that had opened the trunk. A puzzled look crossed Lupin's face. "She wanted you to open it on the full moon? How strange."

"It gets stranger." Harry snorted. "I had to say the runes' translation in parseltongue by myself." He removed the blue baby blanket which kept the trunk from locking again. Handing Remus the videos and camera Harry pointed to the bed. "Just set them on the bed for now."

"I had forgotten about the muggle moving camera Lily had bought." Remus stared at it. Harry watched the man drift into a memory then come back to the present with a kind smile. "Those were great times for James and Lily. Your mom bought this just before your first birthday." He raised the video camera.

"Hagrid said my dad wasn't too happy about her buying it. Do you think it would work here?" Harry asked. "The note said it wouldn't work at Hogwarts."

"We might be able to get it working. Arthur could probably give us a hand. He's had more experience with muggle stuff than I have." Remus said setting the camera on the bed with the video tapes.

Harry pulled up the shelf and handed Remus the dark magic books. "Interesting reads these."

A grave look set in the man's face. "What in the magical world was Lily thinking?" Remus frowned. "I can't believe she could even purchase such books." He watched Harry unwrap a bundle of soft leather, pause for a moment and turn to face him with the Runespoor Shield on his arm.

Instantly the runespoor placed her long length at Harry's shield side hissing at Remus. Lupin stepped back not able to take his eyes off the serpent heads on the shield, red eyes blazing. A current of power and invulnerability flowed from the shield into Harry.

"Harry?" Remus said quietly then sighed as Harry dropped his arm and took the shield off. "Unbelievable! I've heard of the Runespoor Shield. I never in my life thought I'd see it." With his hands behind his back to show the serpent he had no intention of touching the device, he stepped over to look at it closely.

"I can feel the magic in it." Harry said. "I think the only magic I've felt stronger is Dumbledore."

"How did Lily get it?" Remus shook his head. "There are wizards that would give their wand arm to have that."

"And Hermione has a big prize too." Harry said and told Remus about the Salazar Slytherin book. Lupin's mouth dropped open.

"How could she get her hands on a book like that? Let alone pay for it." Remus paced across Harry's bedroom frowning.

"You're asking me?" Harry snorted. "I thought you two were pretty good friends."

"I thought I knew Lily. But this." Remus walked back to the books and picked one up, shaking his head. "I just don't understand."

"That's too bad because I was really hoping you might have some idea what she was thinking at the time." Harry handed him the letter that had been tied with a red ribbon. Remus hesitated then took it. His eyes grew big as he read through the note. For a long time Lupin

didn't speak but stood staring at the page clearly thinking hard. Then he shrugged and gave a little nod. Harry looked at him expectantly.

"This is the way I see it, Harry." Remus ran his hand through his hair. "I trust Lily's judgment. She had this uncanny ability to know things." He nodded as if agreeing with himself. "Not just a feeling. She knew." He sighed and looked at the book in his hand. "With that fact firmly in my mind I have no doubt you do need these things." Remus lifted his head to gaze at Harry and handed the dark magic book to him.

Harry put a hand on the book and his scar twinged with pain. The book dropped between them with a loud thud as he clapped his hand onto his forehead. The other he held up to stop Remus from being concerned. "He's angry about something." Harry kept rubbing his scar. "Angry anticipation." The words came out without Harry thinking much about them but he knew instantly what he said was true. Voldemort was looking forward to something but was also angry about it.

"Could it have been Percy's escape?" Remus asked.

"Maybe." Harry closed his eyes. "No, I don't think so. Something is going to happen." He opened his eyes and then shrugged. "Voldemort is blocking me as much as he can but he's too angry to completely shut me out." Seeing the worried look on Remus's face he added. "I'll be alright, the pain is easing."

"I really don't know how you stand it Harry." Remus said quietly.

"Sympathy from a werewolf?" Harry snorted. "I don't know how you stand that."

"I suppose it is as they say, we all have our own cross to bear." Remus nodded then laid an arm across Harry shoulders and rubbed his back. "You are not in this alone. Remember that okay?"

"Thanks I appreciate the support." Harry said putting the books back into the small chest. "Want to play a game of chess? It's too quiet around here without Ron."

"Sure," Remus laughed. "I have a set in my room."

After a couple of games of chess, Remus told Harry he had some things to do for the Order. Harry wandered around the large house when he stumbled across Ginny in the mansion's library. Books were strewn around her as she sat cross-legged on the floor. Her red hair hung down as she poured over a book in her lap.

"There you are." Harry said smiling. "I thought the house swallowed you up or something."

Shaking her hair out of her face as she looked up, Ginny smiled back at Harry. "I was just looking up some family history." She indicated the books around her. "I'm glad I convinced Sirius not to throw these out." Harry recognized the title, Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy.

"Find anything interesting?" Harry asked as he cleared a spot and found folding his legs like Ginny's took up more space than it used to.

"Yes and no. Lots of Weasleys, Blacks and Snapes but I haven't found one Potter yet." Ginny said.

"Why the sudden interest in Genealogy?" Harry studied her for a long moment.

"Hapa's story I guess. It just got me curious." Ginny said thoughtfully. "I didn't know much about my family history. I mean if that story is true then technically us Weasleys aren't 'pureblood'."

"That happened long ago before Hogwarts, long before anyone kept track of such things. So I guess it doesn't count." Harry shrugged.

"Well, it should, especially if the muggle blood is strong enough to keep us all in red hair." Ginny said firmly. "Which also makes me question if so called 'pureblood' wizards are truly pure blooded."

"How many generations does it take to make a pureblood? Good question. Let me know if you find anything about the Potters. I know nothing about my family." Harry said. "I guess I could ask Remus but there always seems to be other things to talk about other than the past." He sighed.

"I know what you mean. The past is the past. Nothing can change it." Ginny nodded. "What good is it to know your great great great great uncle invented floo powder?"

"Did your uncle?" Harry looked amazed.

"No, I was just using that as an example." Ginny laughed. "I guess name dropping does impress some people." She gave him sly smile.

"Maybe," Harry returned the devious look. "There isn't any information about someone inventing a cure for giggling is there? I'd really be impressed then."

Ginny's mouth dropped open. "You!" She tossed the heavy book at him and Harry caught it easily, laughing. Then Ginny launched herself at him, bowling him over. "I'll give you giggling." She straddled his waist and started to tickle Harry's ribs.

"What are you doing?" Harry laughed as he grabbed her hands gazing up in amusement at the irritated girl.

"I'm tickling you." Ginny said and the smile dropped from her face and she froze. She swallowed staring at him. "You've never been tickled before." A sadness crossed Ginny's face and tears sprang to her eyes.

"No, but I've seen it done so I bet I could do it to you." Harry didn't want Ginny to feel sorry for him. He rolled her over and after a brief wrestling match, in which Harry couldn't believe how strong Ginny really was, he finally was able to pin her hands by her head as he sat on her waist. Panting Harry grinned. "Now I have you."

"Let me up." Ginny struggled laughing.

"No," Harry grinned, his nose touched hers. When Ginny quit fighting and looked into his eyes, Harry ceased to have any thoughts of tickling her. Slowly Harry placed his lips on hers. He felt Ginny sigh and the tenseness leave her body. The bones in his own body seemed to be melting as he deepened the kiss and a little sound of pleasure came from Ginny. A growl of hunger escaped from Harry when he felt Ginny's hands pulling him closer.

"Ahem!" A voice came from the doorway. Harry leaped to his feet and Ginny scrambled to hers as they faced Mr. Weasley with beet red faces. The man closed his eyes and said quietly. "Ginny, go help your mother in the kitchen. I want to speak with Harry." Mr. Weasley opened his eyes, giving Ginny a stern look.

"Dad, we weren't doing anything wrong." Ginny stuttered. But one look at her father made her fall silent. Giving Harry a worried glance Ginny left the library.

"Sit down Harry." Mr. Weasley took off his glasses and polished them on his robe. Harry sat down in a lumpy arm chair and Mr. Weasley drew up wooden chair to sit opposite him.

"Mr. Weasley," Harry started but in truth he didn't know what to say to the man. Was he supposed to apologize? He wasn't sorry he had kissed Ginny. He was sorry Mr. Weasley had caught them at it.

"Harry, I'm not angry." Mr. Weasley patted his arm. "A bit surprised, I had no idea." He drew a deep breath and rubbed his neck. "Harry, I know you haven't had any one tell you about many things." Mr. Weasley looked intently at Harry. "And I know it really isn't my place to speak to you about such things." If possible Harry's face turned redder.

"Mr. Weasley I know all about..." Harry stammered.

"Sex? Being sixteen I should hope you do." Mr. Weasley said without embarrassment. "You no doubt know all about the mechanics of the act. But there is a lot more you need to know. Things boys in dorms don't normally talk about."

"Like what?" Harry was curious now.

"Like responsibility, honor and commitments." Mr. Weasley said seriously. "If you would rather Remus speak to you I understand. But I have had some experience with talking to boys." He gave a small smile.

"I don't mind talking to you." Harry said quickly.

"Good. It is a bit strange for me, being my daughter we're discussing." Mr. Weasley said. "I'll let Remus bring you up to speed on the necessary spells."

"Spells?" Harry felt so naïve especially when Mr. Weasley closed his eyes and sighed.

"Contraceptive spells." Mr. Weasley took another deep breath. "Not that I hope you will need them anytime soon. Never the less I think you should learn how to use them." Harry nodded his eyes wide with surprise and his cheeks pink again.

"Now what I am about to tell you are my values. How I see things. Perhaps your parents would have told you different. Remus can tell you if I hit near their mark." Mr. Weasley began. "You see Harry, a man, has a responsibility to himself. Yes, I know you thought it would be to his partner but in essence it is the same thing." He nodded. "This responsibility is to be true to oneself. Not to build up some false image of what things should be like."

"To thy own self be true." Harry said quietly then added. "Shakespeare, a muggle playwright."

Mr. Weasley looked at him and blinked. "Yes, that is exactly what I mean. Actually for all you have been through, Harry, you have a remarkably clear head." Mr. Weasley said seriously.

"Cheers" Harry gave him a slight smile.

"So that brings me to a man's honor. A man's honor needs constant attention. It is easy to let slide a slight promise that doesn't seem

important. But in my opinion, the smallest promise is as important as the largest." Mr. Weasley said. "In some sense it show the true mettle of a man if he's able to keep those small promises how ever inconvenient."

"I can understand that." Harry nodded.

"Good." Mr. Weasley smiled slightly. "Now, commitments, in a relationship with a girl," The man paused thinking. "This is difficult; I keep seeing you and Ginny..." A grimace passed over Mr. Weasley face. Harry's face reddened again. "Sorry Harry." The man gave a wry smile and cleared his throat. "These urges Harry...now I know all about the hormones coursing through a young man's body."

"We weren't doing anything, honest Mr. Weasley." Harry stammered. "Ginny started trying to tickle me..."

"Ah, the after wrestling match kiss." Mr. Weasley laughed. "Don't look so shocked Harry. I do have seven children and have wrestled a bit in my time." The man sobered and said. "However, things can go too far if one isn't careful." He took a deep breath. "I love my sons but Ginny, well, she's the apple of my eye as the saying goes. Molly would have been content with six sons but I wanted a little girl just like her."

"With a bit of Fred and George thrown in." Harry added smiling.

"Ah, yes. And that makes her even more, how should I say, formidable." Mr. Weasley warned. "Mark my words Harry when push comes to shove, you'll have to be the one with restraint and control." Harry blushed deeper. "I know I know. I'm probably pushing your relationship far past the point you've even thought of yet. But as Ginny's father I feel I must put you on your guard. She is only fifteen Harry. Remember that, please." Mr. Weasley said.

"I know Mr. Weasley. I'll tell you what I told Ron." Harry looked the man straight in the eyes. "I have too much respect for Ginny and for your whole family to do anything that would jeopardize our trust in each other." He held out his hand to Mr. Weasley.

"Well, said Harry." Mr. Weasley shook the hand then pulled Harry into a brief hug. "I think we understand each other quite well." They both sighed and Harry hoped the talk was over. Mr. Weasley stood up cleared his throat and said. "I'm hungry let's see if they have dinner ready."

Chapter 30

When Harry and Mr. Weasley entered the kitchen Fred, George and Ginny sat beside Percy who was covered in large bright blue spots. Mrs. Weasley flitted around the stove irritated by the laughter at Percy's expense. Mr. Weasley schooled his face into a stern look.

"Fred, George can't you do something about this?" Mr. Weasley pointed at Percy. "I mean really. He can't go about like that."

"We have tried." George said with a straight face. "But all our solutions cause the blue spots to burn."

"Or to turn pink." Fred added. "Or change to elephant skin. Or...."

"I get the idea." Mr. Weasley sighed.

Harry was surprised Percy was taking his spots without any of his normal annoyance. He took a seat beside Percy and stared at the blue dots. Dinner was soon on the table before them and all tucked in for some time before anyone spoke again.

"So Percy, what do you think of Fred and George's joke shop?" Harry asked. He avoided Ginny's eyes who had sat down opposite him.

"Actually," Percy paused from cutting his steak. "They have quite a business going. I'll be surprised if they aren't rich before they're thirty."

Everyone in the kitchen stopped dead. Food dripped from forks halfway to mouths. George choked on the butterbeer he had just swallowed.

"You can't be serious." Mrs. Weasley stared at her twins suspiciously.

"I am." Percy nodded. "I'm as floored as you, Mother." He snorted. "Never in my wildest imaginings would I have thought a joke shop would do so well. If Fred and George invest some of their profits, they'll have it made."

Fred put a fork full of food in his mouth but it seemed he had forgotten how to chew and swallowed it whole. "Invest in what?" He choked.

"It depends on a lot of things. I could help you decide if you want." Percy offered sincerely.

"Thanks." George gave a guilty glance to his twin. Fred sighed and nodded. George reached into his robes and drew out a wrapped candy, gazed at it for a moment then handed it to Percy. "Here, it will take care of the spots."

Harry watched Percy, now spotless; close his eyes in relish as he bit into one of his mother's delicious apple pies. Despite all the familiar faces, Harry still missed Ron and Hermione. He turned to Remus. "I've been thinking, couldn't the Granger's come here say for Christmas Eve? Stay the night and then we could all be together for Christmas, Hermione's folks too."

Everybody looked at Lupin. "I suppose it's possible." He considered for a moment. "I'll have to run it by Dumbledore. A port key could get them in and out." Remus looked at Harry. "I'm afraid you'd have to play host on Christmas Eve. I'll be...busy." For a moment Harry didn't understand then he knew. Christmas Eve was full moon. His face fell but Lupin clapped his shoulder. "Don't worry; I'll be up and about on Christmas."

"I can be host for one evening." Harry grinned. The prospect of having his friends back with him made Harry very happy. He looked over the table and grinned at Ginny but a sudden chill up his spine made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He froze and a stony glazed expression replaced his smile.

"Harry?" Ginny tried to catch his eye. "Are you alright?"

Everyone turned to stare at him. Shaking himself, Harry nodded. "I just felt a draft or something. I'm fine."

"Does your scar hurt?" Remus asked concerned.

"No, not really. It's been aching off and on but not now." Harry shook his head but then realized he was rubbing his forehead. Grabbing his butterbeer Harry took a swig trying to ignore all the eyes on him. Remus touched his arm and gave him an inquiring look.

"I'm fine." Harry paused letting the strange feeling pass again. He gave a shudder without realizing it.

"Harry?" Remus said softly. "Talk to us. What's happening?"

"I don't know." Harry rubbed his forehead again. "The same anger and anticipation I felt before but it's stronger now."

"You think it's going to happen soon?" Remus asked then grabbed at Harry as the teen slid from his seat. A sharp pain stabbed Harry's scar. Clamping his hand onto his forehead Harry closed his eyes against the searing pain.

He was standing in the center of a small group of wizards, all dressed in black robes and wearing masks. The same angry anticipation coursed through his mind as he spoke to the ring of wizards.

"As ever it is a glorious time to welcome a new death eater into my fold." Voldemort turned full circle looking at each death eater in turn.

"Once again I will have a follower untainted by failure or lack of loyalty." He let the barb sink in as a slight shudder went through the ring of watching wizards. "Lucius, bring in our new member."

The death eater closest to the door quickly opened it and beckoned to someone on the other side. The torch light reflected off the white blond hair of a pale skinned teen as he entered completely naked and walked slowly to the center and stopped next to Voldemort.

"Ah Draco. Are you ready?" Voldemort touched a finger to the jaw of the boy. Draco flinched and nodded without speaking. With a snap of Voldemort's fingers the teen was slammed to the stone floor spread eagle. Slowly Voldemort placed a booted foot on the smooth bare

chest. Drawing his wand Voldemort touched its tip to Draco's left forearm.

"Speak your oath for all to hear." Voldemort said as Harry stared into the scared eyes of the blond.

"Burn my flesh so I will know when to serve you." Draco said as loudly as he could.

"Morsmordre!" Voldemort chanted. Draco screamed and writhed with agony but couldn't move an inch as a green skull with a snake protruding through its mouth flared bright and hot on his forearm. When Voldemort lifted his wand, the mark turned black. Removing his foot from the boy's chest, he waved to the others and commanded. "Robe him."

Six of the death eaters quickly dressed Draco with new black robes and a mask then left him standing on shaking legs in the center of the circle.

"Draco at your young age I shall appoint a mentor for you." Voldemort turned to a dark eyed death eater. "Severus you shall teach young Malfoy what he needs to know."

"It will be my honor Master." The Death Eater bowed to Voldemort.

"Excellent. Come, Severus." Voldemort motioned to the center. Without hesitation Snape stepped forward.

"Your first lesson Draco will be to see what happens when someone betrays Lord Voldemort!" At those words Voldemort waved his wand at Snape binding his arms another flick and the potion master dangled as if tied to the ceiling by his arms, his feet barely touching the floor.

"Strip him." Voldemort raged. Savage hands of the other wizards tore at the black robes, which soon lay in a tattered heap below the man's feet. "Crucio!" Voldemort pointed his wand at Snape who screamed in agony until the wand was lifted. Snape gasped for breath leaning heavily on the magical bonds holding him.

Voldemort stood face to face with him and Harry looked into the drained face of Snape. "You think I didn't know Severus? You think you are a powerful enough wizard to keep me in the dark?" The fear in Snape's eyes grew. "Yes, it is well to fear me." Voldemort drew a long spidery finger along Snape's bare chest digging it in to leave a mark. "You think I didn't know you were a spy for that old fool?" Voldemort anger flared. "Crucio!" Snape screamed again bucking against the magical ropes then went limp when the spell was lifted.

"I am not going to kill you." Voldemort laughed. "No killing you would not satisfy me. Your dear friend Dumbledore believes there are things worse than death." Voldemort sneered cruelly. "I am going to test his theory. Crucio" Snape's yells echoed around the small room.

When Voldemort lifted his wand this time Snape was barely conscious. "Now, Draco, my boy, come here." Voldemort held out an arm and placed it across the teen's shoulders. "He should be an excellent teacher. You will learn to perform the Cruciatus curse on him and perfect your technique."

Malfoy's eyes darted fearfully to Voldemort then the suspended naked man, who used to be his favorite teacher. He drew his wand out and pointed it at Snape. "Crucio." Nothing happened. The blond looked even more frightened as he tried again. "Crucio." He said louder. Snape didn't even flinch.

"Perhaps you need some motivation Draco." Voldemort said in a silky voice. "Think. This traitor has betrayed your master. This traitor has helped Dumbledore." Voldemort glared furiously as he spoke. "This filth has even helped Harry Potter."

With the mention of his enemy's name Draco's eyes flared. "Yes, you feel the anger. Good! Try again." Voldemort stepped back.

Eyes blazing Draco shouted "Crucio." Snape jerked and screamed until Voldemort put a thin hand on Draco's arm forcing it down.

"Good. But I don't want him killed or driven insane. I have other plans for him." Voldemort patted Draco on the back. "Pity though, you

have could practice the killing curse on him.” The dark wizard thought for a moment. “Who would you like to kill, other than Harry Potter of course?”

A cold sneering leer crossed Draco’s pale face. “Granger. The mudblood Hermione Granger.”

Voldemort roared his approval. “Well said. It shall be done.” Turning to the group he said. “Get me the Grangers. Bring back all who are in the house, alive. Draco needs to practice.” The death eaters bowed and quickly left the room.”

Harry struggled to break free of the connection. When he opened his eyes many faces surrounded him causing him to draw away in fear. The excruciating pain made Harry sick and he quickly pulled away from the hands holding on to him and threw up. He coughed trying to speak.

“Take it easy Harry.” Remus put a hand on his back.

“No, Hermione.” Harry gagged again. The pain was so intense Harry wasn’t sure where he was. He knew he was on the floor but wasn’t sure in which room.

Mrs. Weasley’s voice rang out. “No everyone stay out.” Her voice seemed fearful.

“Grangers.” Harry retched again fighting it with all he had. He didn’t know if they had heard him. Another wave of severe pain shot through his scar causing him to gag once more but there was nothing in his stomach to bring up anymore. Sweat dripped down his face as he groped for Lupin. But when he tried to speak his stomach twisted once more.

“Let me in!” A frantic voice filtered through the pain in Harry’s head. Ginny fought to get closer. “Let go of me Percy. I can help him. I said let go!” A yelp of pain was heard and the next moment Ginny was kneeling beside Harry laying her hand on his forehead.

“Get back Ginny!” Her mother tried to stop her but Ginny was too determined. The instant her hand made contact with Harry’s scar everyone could see the pain vanish from his face.

The blessed absence of pain washed over Harry. Grabbing Lupin’s arm Harry blurted out. “He’s sent for Hermione and her family. You have to get there before they do, Remus. Hurry!” Remus stared for split second then disappeared followed by Mr. Weasley, Bill, Charlie, Fred and George.

Panting Harry lay still letting the relief from the pain strengthen him before trying to rise. He glanced at Mrs. Weasley on his right side. Her mouth hung open in shock. But Mrs. Weasley wasn’t looking at him. She was staring at Ginny with the same expression Harry was used to seeing from strangers, astonished awe.

“Ginny!” Mrs. Weasley said in a hush tone. “You’re an empath.”

For once it wasn’t Harry that said. “I’m a what?” Ginny glanced down at Harry to see if he understood. He gave a little shake of his head.

“I don’t believe it.” Mrs. Weasley covered her mouth with her hands. “It is truly amazing.”

“Mom?” Ginny began to get irritated. “What’s an empath?”

“An empath is a witch or wizard who can heal by touch.” Mrs. Weasley said softly. “The ability is very rare. It’s even rarer than being a parselmouth.” Her eyes misted and Mrs. Weasley swallowed. “Most had thought the talent had died out. Oh, Ginny!”

With that Mrs. Weasley grabbed her daughter to hug her. Ginny’s hand left Harry’s forehead and he cried out in pain. Pulling away from her mother Ginny place her hand back on the scar and Harry sighed in relief.

“Let’s get you on the bed you’ll be more comfortable.” Mrs. Weasley took his arm. Ginny pulled on his other arm to help him up.

Harry stumbled over to his bed. How he had gotten to his bedroom he didn't know. When Ginny momentarily lost contact his forehead he crumbled in pain until she replaced her hand. Mrs. Weasley helped him under the covers and Ginny sat on the bed by his pillow, her hand on his forehead.

"What happened?" Ginny asked.

"He has Snape. Voldemort knows he's a spy for Dumbledore." Harry heard a horrified gasp come from Mrs. Weasley. "Yeah. He's torturing him." Harry closed his eyes. "Draco Malfoy became a death eater tonight. Voldemort's letting him practice the cruciatus curse on him. That's why he sent for the Grangers. So he can practice the killing curse on them." He opened his eyes fearfully. "They've just got to stop them. They will won't they?" Harry knew he was ranting but his control was at an all time low. The thought of losing Ron and Hermione was sending him over the edge.

"I'm sure they will." Mrs. Weasley patted his shoulder but her eyes show how worried she was.

"They have to." Ginny said softly.

"They have to." Harry repeated.

Author's notes: Thanks for the reviews

I almost left the Wes Sly story out, now I'm glad I didn't. I'm always amazed what people pick out of a chapter to comment on. Sometimes just a little thing thrown in stands out to people more than I realized or intended. But that's the fun of it all!

Darker things are happening but I didn't think the torture was graphic enough to warrant an R rating? Let me know if it should.

Chapter 31

The minutes ticked away like hours as Harry, Ginny and Mrs. Weasley waited for news. The thought of losing his friends made Harry sick so he tried to focus on something else. "Mrs. Weasley, doesn't an empath take on the pain of the person they are healing?"

"Goodness no." Mrs. Weasley said looking shocked. "What good would that do? Oh...perhaps a muggle empath feels the pain but really the wizard way is much better, dear. Of course there isn't a lot known about empathic ability because it is so rare." She smiled at her daughter.

Nodding Harry's thoughts went back to Ron and Hermione. "Shouldn't we have heard something by now?" He asked.

"It's only been forty five minutes." Mrs. Weasley said patting his arm. "Would you like me to get you some tea Harry? To sooth your stomach?" Harry nodded and closed his eyes. This was as bad as waiting for news the night Mr. Weasley had been attacked by the snake last Christmas.

"Is Malfoy really helping to torture Snape?" Ginny asked when her mother had left. "That's hard to believe. I thought they were pretty close."

"I don't think anyone could get close to Malfoy." Harry said then softly added. "Voldemort doesn't plan to kill him. I think..." He closed his eyes at the memory of the fear in Snape's face. Harry swallowed hard. Ginny doesn't need to hear this he thought.

"What?" Ginny wouldn't let the unfinished thought die. "Tell me."

"I'm not sure." Harry stalled. "Besides there's nothing we can do for him. I don't know where they are."

Before Ginny could insist he answer, Mrs. Weasley came back into the room carrying a tea tray. She poured a cup for all of them and they waited and waited. After a while Ginny's hand on Harry's forehead became hot and sweaty with the prolonged touch to his skin.

“Ginny? Why don’t you move your hand off and see what happens?” Harry touched her arm. She took her hand away and when Ginny saw Harry flinch with pain tried to put it back. But Harry caught her hand before she could. “No, it’s not as bad as it was.” He said with his eyes closed. “Hang on a minute.” Harry steeled his mind against the pain and opened his eyes again.

“Are you alright?” Ginny asked worried.

“Yeah, but I can’t go around with you attached to my forehead all the time.” Harry gave a lopsided grin to Ginny. “Now and then will be great but let’s face it, it wouldn’t be very comfortable for either of us.” He gave her hand a kiss then blushed bright red when he remembered Mrs. Weasley was sitting there watching. Giving her a guilty glance Harry released Ginny’s hand and sipped his tea like nothing had happened. But he had seen a surprised look of delight on Mrs. Weasley face and wondered what it meant.

“Art thee well, Master?” The runespoor spoke from the hearth rug.

“I’m...well, I’ll be okay.” Harry told the serpent. When Harry spoke in parseltongue, Mrs. Weasley jumped up and looked around.

“Oh,” Mrs. Weasley screamed. “I’d forgotten all about that thing.” She backed away toward the door. “Harry dear, please could you make it go to some other room?”

“I doubt it.” Harry shook his head. “Like Madeye said, she is guarding something and I doubt if she will leave it unguarded with you here and me in bed like this. She will stay on the rug. Won’t you Hapa?”

“Yes, I am full and sleepy and the fire is warm.” Hapa curled up with the other two heads. Harry told her what the runespoor said. Mrs. Weasley eyed it for a long time then sat down at the desk to keep an eye on it.

Two hours later Harry felt restless. He threw off the covers and sat up. “We should have heard something by now.” He fumed.

"Harry please get back into bed." Mrs. Weasley urged.

"I'm fine." Harry tried not to sound too impatient about her mothering him. But he felt if he didn't get up and move he would crawl out of his skin. Harry paced over to Hedwig and stroked her. Again he began to imagine the very worst had happened. What if everyone died in the attempt to save the Grangers and Ron? Harry rubbed his eyes under his glasses. He had to stop thinking like that. Remus, Mr. Weasley, Bill and Charlie were all powerful wizards. And Fred and George should be able to take on half a dozen death eaters just the two of them. The thought of seeing a couple of death eaters turned into canaries or on their knees with their tongues lolling out four feet long calmed Harry a bit.

Absentmindedly he offered Hedwig some owl treats. Then a dull crash came from floors below them. "They're back!" Harry ran to the door, followed by Ginny and Mrs. Weasley.

Sirius's Mother started screaming. "Blood traitors and filthy half breeds in my house! Be gone!"

Harry raced past her without even a glance. Voices, lots of voices rang up from the kitchen in the basement. Panting Harry pushed the door opened followed closely by Ginny and Mrs. Weasley.

A babble of voices hit them when they entered. Harry glanced quickly around. Ron lay pale and not moving on the cold stone floor. Mr. Weasley knelt beside his youngest son and on the other side of Ron was Bill. Hermione stood by the stove, her mother's hands clutching her shoulders. Hermione's father had his hand on his wife's shoulder and they all looked windswept. George and Charlie were helping to bandage Fred whose arm was bleeding profusely. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny both gasped and froze for a moment. Then the next instant Mrs. Weasley hurried over to help Fred and Ginny was beside her brother on the floor.

"Ron!" Harry dropped to his knees beside his ashen friend. "What's wrong? He isn't?" He couldn't say it.

“No...no he'll be fine, Harry.” Mr. Weasley patted his shoulder. “Ron got hit by two stunning spells. He just needs a little time.” Harry sighed in relief. Then glanced around and felt his heart sink.

“Where's Remus?” Harry felt the panic rise in him.

“Calm down Harry.” Bill answered still watching Ron's face intently. “Remus is fine. Percy was taken to St. Mungo's but he'll be fine.”

“Why what happened?” Harry glanced from Mr. Weasley to Bill.

Both men sighed. “I have never seen six wizards fight so desperately.” Mr. Weasley said quietly. “They didn't expect us, especially in such force.”

“It was like trying to capture a cornered animal.” Charlie said from the table. “Percy got blasted through a stone wall. Never seen anything like that spell.”

“But where's Remus?” Harry's voice said louder and with a note of panic. Were they not telling him something? He couldn't lose Remus.

“I told you Lupin is fine.” Bill said looking up. “He stayed behind with Dumbledore, Tonks and Kingsley to round up the Death Eaters and bring the Grangers' and Ron's things back here.”

“Dumbledore was there? How'd he find out?” Ginny asked gently touching Ron's cheek. Ron's eyelids fluttered and opened. His glazed unfocused eyes wandered around the room. “Ron!” She patted his cheek a bit.

“Hey I'm awake. You don't have to slap me.” Ron groaned.

“Oh, Ron!” Hermione broke away from her parents and flung her arms around him. Tears leaked down her face. “You were so brave.”

“Oh please Hermione.” George snorted. “Can't you slobber over him some other time when we don't have to watch?”

“He saved my mother and father from getting stunned!” Hermione flared and turned to glare at George then back to hug Ron again, who grinned embarrassedly. “But I still don’t understand why all this happened. You saw something Harry?” She looked over at him questioningly.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded and swallowed, fighting the urge to rub his scar which still stung. “I think you should sit down.” He stood up and nodded to Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Slowly Mr. and Mrs. Granger slipped into chairs at the table. Ron was helped into a chair by Bill and his dad. Hermione stared at Harry before taking a seat beside Ron.

“Voldemort knows Snape was a spy for Dumbledore.” Harry waited for the gasps from the others to die away. All eyes were on Harry now. “He’s being tortured.” He swallowed as the memory made him shudder. As much as he hated Snape Harry didn’t want that. “Voldemort is having Malfoy learn the cruciatus curse by practicing on Snape.”

“What are you talking about? Malfoy already knows the cruciatus curse.” Charlie snorted. “He was flinging it around like made tonight.”

“Lucius Malfoy might. But Voldemort’s newest death eater, Draco, didn’t know it.” Harry said and before anyone could interrupt he added. “He didn’t want Snape killed so he asked Draco who he wanted to kill. You were one he named Hermione.” Harry met her eyes then looked away at the horror in them. How could he tell her the rest? But Hermione wasn’t the smartest witch in their year for nothing.

“So he sent his death eaters after all who was in our house so, dear Draco could practice the killing curse on us.” She ended her conclusion in an angry snarl. Harry nodded glad he didn’t have to say it. Her parents stared in disbelief, too much in shock to say anything.

“Dad?” Charlie nudged his father. “I think Fred needs to go to St. Mungo’s too. This cut is getting bigger and we can’t stop the bleeding.”

Mr. Weasley examined the wound. “It looks like a splitting spell. I think St. Mungo’s is a good idea.”

“Wait, let Ginny try.” Mrs. Weasley motioned for her daughter then when Ginny glared at her; she grabbed her daughter by the arm and pulled her over to Fred. “Ginny is an empath, Arthur.” She said proudly.

“My word!” Mr. Weasley gasped. “Ginny!”

“Mom,” Ginny said exasperated. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Just try putting your hand on the cut.” Mrs. Weasley started to unwrap the blood soaked cloth around Fred’s arm. Ginny glared at her mother for putting her on the spot but one look at Fred’s pale face she relented. She patted her brother on the shoulder.

“I’ll try.” Ginny sighed and looked at the wound. The blood from the slash still flowed freely and as she watched it the cut visibly lengthened. Her small hand barely covered the cut as Ginny gently pressed her hand against it. Fred flinched and then gave a soft “oh”.

“Damn it!” Ginny cried as blood seeped on to her green jumper sleeve at the point where the wound would be on her arm. “I hope that doesn’t stain.”

“Doesn’t it hurt?” Harry asked, leaning across the table to watch.

“No, not a bit.” Ginny lifted her hand on Fred’s arm and all that remained was a red puckered scar. Charlie grabbed Ginny’s arm and pushed up the sleeve of her sweater. There was no mark or sign of any wound.

“Wow!” Charlie whistled. “Impressive Ginny.”

"I thought empaths all died out long ago." Fred said examining his arm then taking out his wand and removing the blood stain on the sleeve of Ginny's sweater.

"Which proves there is much we do not know about empathic ability." Albus Dumbledore stepped out of the huge kitchen fireplace. He held an empty cage and dragged a trunk forward out of the green flame. Bill hurried over to give him a hand.

"I let your owl out to fly back here on his own, Ron. He seemed overly excited so I thought it would be best if he could burn off some energy." Dumbledore told Ron.

"Thanks Professor." Ron said. "He'd drive us nuts if you hadn't."

The next instant Tonks appeared in the green fire with a squirming Crookshanks in her arms. "Too bad cats can't fly." She muttered, her hands and arms were covered in scratches. "Cats do not like traveling by floo powder." Tonks let the big cat go and he took one last swipe at her before he disappeared under the sideboard hissing. Bill helped Tonks pull Hermione's trunk from the ashes.

As soon as it was out of the way the form of Kingsley Shacklebolt appeared in a flare of green flames with two suitcases. He stepped quickly in to the kitchen and set the luggage near the trunks. To Harry's relief the next person to emerge from the fireplace was Lupin. There were three suitcases by his feet and he carried a television and what Harry knew was a video recorder. Carefully he set the electronics on a trunk and dragged the baggage from the fire.

Remus noticed Harry's intense gaze and said. "I'm okay Harry." He turned to Mrs. Weasley. "Percy will be fine too Molly. He'll be home tomorrow morning. They just wanted to keep him over night for observation."

"Mr. and Mrs. Granger," Dumbledore turned to Hermione's parents. "Excuse me, it is Doctor isn't it?"

"Yes, but please, call me Robert and this is Martha." Mr. Granger rose and held out his hand to Dumbledore. "I know you are the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Professor Dumbledore."

Dumbledore shook the man's hand and nodded. "That's right. Robert, Martha I know this must be very distressing for you." He said kindly.

"I'm confused as to why this Voldemort." Mr. Granger said his name slowly. "Is after my family. He gave a nod toward Harry. "He said the Malfoy boy wanted to kill Hermione?"

Dumbledore looked sharply at Harry. "I'm afraid you know more about the situation than I. Perhaps Harry, you should fill the rest of us in as to what happened this evening." Charlie offered his seat to the headmaster who nodded his thanks and sat down waiting for Harry to begin. Once more Harry felt all the eyes in the room on him. Even those who had heard it before fell silent to hear the account again.

Taking a deep breath Harry started at the beginning with Draco Malfoy becoming a death eater. Harry watched the headmaster closely as he told about Snape cover being blown. Dumbledore closed his eyes and put his face in his hands.

"Oh, no!" Tonks cried in dismay and leaned against Remus who put a comforting arm around her. Kingsley gazed at the floor and took several deep breaths.

"Is Severus Snape still alive?" Dumbledore raised his head to look at Harry.

"Yes." Harry nodded. "Voldemort wants to see if there is something worse than death. He's torturing him." Tonks gasped again and Remus swore.

"My worse scenario is realized." Dumbledore said quietly with grief and fear on his face. A surge of anger flared in Harry and must have shown in his face too. Dumbledore frowned. "I know you didn't like Professor Snape. Harry but he doesn't deserve this. He...I wouldn't

call a close friend but a friend of mine nevertheless.” His anger began to show.

“No one deserves what Voldemort puts them through. I wouldn’t wish it on even Snape.” Harry returned trying hard to keep his anger in check. “What I’m angry about you have yet to figure out and doesn’t need to be brought up here.”

The blue eyes of the old wizard darted back and forth as if rewinding the conversation and trying to figure out the connection. “I see. I’m sorry I misinterpreted your feeling. I am a bit upset. Severus is a brave man for what he has done for the order.” Dumbledore cleared his throat and turned back to the Grangers.

“For the moment you are safe. But it won’t be possible for you to back to your home. Remus Lupin and Harry, I’m sure, have no objections of you staying here for as long as necessary.” Dumbledore received nods from Remus and Harry.

“But we can’t just leave our lives, our practice.” Mr. Granger said almost frantically, trying to make Dumbledore see reason. “Our patients count on us.”

“I’m sure they do. Even so, I’m sure they would want you safe would they not?” Dumbledore said then sighed. “I’m afraid your lives and many more will be put on hold before this war is through.”

Mrs. Granger leaned against her husband. “I guess if Ron can stand to brave our muggle home,” She grinned at the redhead. “I think I can handle a wizard house.”

“The thing I don’t know about is…” Ron had a serious look on his face. “How much do I tip a Headmaster for carrying my trunk?”

Dumbledore gave Ron a gaze over his half-moon spectacles. “I have a tip for you Mr. Weasley. It is just as easy to pull someone out of the way of a stunning spell as to jump in front of them and take the spell yourself.” Ron’s ears turned red as everyone, including him laughed.

Harry stopped laughing much sooner than the others. He watched Fred and George teased Ron and the group smiling at the joking brothers. It had been close Harry thought soberly very close. Then a sharp twinge shot through his scar and he couldn't keep his hand from going to his forehead.

Author's notes: Reviewers!! Thanks for the encouragement!! It keeps me going.

Did you know empath is not a word in any dictionary I looked at on the web? Empathic, empathize and empathy are there but no empath, which is strange because the word has been around for a long time. Even if it is a mythical person there are many such entries in the dictionaries. Go figure. This in mind...I made up my own definition. G

Chapter 32

When Voldemort realized his death eaters had failed him again, he went into a rage. He took his anger out on Snape at regular intervals. The next three days went by without Harry being aware of anything but pain, constant unceasing pain. At times it lessened but the only real respite from Voldemort's ire was a soft cool hand on his forehead. Ginny's touch allowed him to rest for brief periods. At first he tried to eat what Mrs. Weasley offered him but when he was sick afterwards Harry refused anything but water. Even the dreamless sleep potion Dumbledore brought Harry couldn't keep down.

On the Friday before Christmas, Harry woke to find the pain, not gone completely but much subsided. He rose and swayed uneasily. His stomach reminding him he hadn't had anything to eat in three days. But Harry felt sweaty so he thought he would shower first. Soon he was standing in the warm stream and lathered up his hair. Just after he had rinsed the shampoo his scar gave an excruciating jolt. Harry gasped and leaned against the stone tile wall of the shower. The next wave of pain made Harry's knees buckle and he slid to the wet floor, clutching his head.

Voldemort gazed at the white skin of a man hanging from the ceiling. Dark metal manacles had gouged sores into the thin wrists. Voldemort raised his wand to cast a spell but Harry's mind told him. "Don't!"

"Ah, Severus, your dear friend Harry Potter is with us today. I wondered if he would show up again." Harry saw Snape's eyes open. The dark hollow eyes showed no hope and the look of a defeated man. Harry swallowed. Never in his many hours with Snape had Harry ever thought the man could fall so far. "Do you believe this Severus? He actually feels sorry for you." Voldemort laughed. "No doubt he wants to rush in and rescue you."

"Why do you get pleasure from his pain?" Harry asked trying to take in the surroundings, something that could give them a clue as to where Snape was.

"Ah well, I suppose it is an acquired taste." Voldemort said dryly. "And don't tell me you never thought of hurting this man. I saw the memories of you wanting to smash his head in with a cauldron."

"No I won't deny he's a git. And I've wanted to smash his face in for a long time. But I could never do what you are doing to him." Harry said.

"I'll give you a lesson then. This you see." Voldemort poked Snape's ribs with a long boney finger. "Ceases to be a person. It is an object to entertain me." Voldemort raised a wand and cried. "Crucio." Snape's voice croaked a dry hoarse cry. The dark wizard lifted his wand. "See he dances like a puppet on a string." Voldemort laughed. "But he is getting a bit boring. I must see he gets a friend." Harry didn't like the tone of Voldemort voice. "Or more so a pet."

"Harry?" A voice penetrated Voldemort's cold laugh and hands pulled at him. "Harry?"

Opening his eyes Harry saw the blurry outline of Remus. "I'll be okay." Harry heard Remus give a snort as he was helped to his feet and a towel put in his hand. Wrapping the towel around his waist Harry stepped out of the shower leaning heavily on Lupin.

"What were you thinking? Trying this without telling someone?" Remus asked giving him another towel to dry his hair as Harry sat on the toilet.

"I felt better this morning. Thought a shower would feel good." Harry rubbed his hair then his chest and arms. He spotted his glasses and put them on but took them off again to rub the steam off them.

"You're lucky I came along." Remus said. "Molly was just about to come charging in here. She heard you cry out."

"Oh good. She would have really had seen Harry Potter and all his glory then." Harry snorted and rubbed his eyes before putting his glasses on. For long time he sat without speaking, his hand had gone from his eyes to his scar. "I don't now how much of this I can take Remus." Harry said softly. "Voldemort plans to put something in with Snape. He said a friend then changed it to pet." Harry shook his head

trying to remember. "He was in a different place now. More like a dungeon and he was chained."

Lupin swallowed hard. "I wish I knew what to do for you Harry." He laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Dumbledore has talked to the Healers at St. Mungos about the pain and none have been able to come up with anything that can block it."

Lifting his head to look at the man, Harry sighed. "Nothing blocks it except Ginny. And she stays until I have to tell her to leave." Just thinking of Ginny made Harry feel better. The simple knowledge that there was relief from the pain if he wanted it made it easier to bear.

There was a pounding on the door. "Is everything alright in there?" Mrs. Weasley's voice sounded impatient.

"He's okay Molly. Just let him get decent." Remus gave Harry a grin. "Speaking of Ginny, Arthur asked me about teaching you a few special spells." Harry felt his face redden. "Well, if you insist in snogging his daughter on the floor of the library..." Remus laughed and gave Harry's shoulder a pat. "Sorry I couldn't resist."

"That seems like years ago." Harry sighed, his stomach rumbled. "I'm so hungry." Remus smile faded. His attempt to distract Harry hadn't worked.

"I'm sure Molly or Mrs. Granger would fix anything you like." Lupin said.

"I know. I just can't keep it down." Harry turned to the clean clothes he had brought with him to the bathroom.

"I'll be outside guarding the door." Lupin said.

"Thanks Remus." Harry said. "I know it's hard for everyone else too. Thanks for trying." Lupin patted him on the shoulder and squeezed out of the door. Harry heard Mrs. Weasley demanding to know why Harry had been left alone. Slowly Harry got dress. Every bone in his body seemed to ache with the memory of the intense pain he kept feeling.

Lupin was still outside the door when Harry left the bathroom. Harry gave him an irritated gaze. "I swore to Molly I'd stay here until you came out. I'd rather face your wrath than hers."

"I hear you." Harry laughed tiredly. After returning to his bedroom Harry couldn't force himself to get into bed again even though he was tired. Instead he sat on the floor with the runespoor, stroking its smooth side. It was soothing to feel the cool scales on his hand and the undulating ripples of the muscles in the serpent's thick body.

"Why are you in pain Master?" Kesho asked.

"A curse scar keeps me connected with a dark wizard." Harry said almost sounding bored as he explained. "When he feels strong emotions I feel pain. Especially anger."

"Ah, then you must feel stronger emotion, perhaps he would feel pain instead." Kesho suggested.

"That theory does have merit. But anger is the only emotion that seemed to have any affect on the pain I feel." Harry yawned stretching out beside the thick coils.

"Perhaps you have not felt the other feelings strong enough. But then you are young and emotions run close to the scales." The runespoor uncurled and bumped Harry's head lying on his arms. He lifted his head for a moment to see what was going on and the serpent made a pillow for his head with her coils.

"Thanks, Kesho. So you mean I'm shallow. I've heard that before." Harry yawned again causing his eyes to water. "I think I know what you mean though." He closed his eyes surprised to hear the serpent's heart beating.

"Yesss. To feel hope, happiness and most important love, takes practice." Kesho said.

Not opening his eyes Harry said. "Yeah I thought it would come to that." He snorted. "For ten years I had no hope, happiness or love. Now I can say I've had bits of each and it's sort of bittersweet."

"How so Master?" Kesho flicked her tongue in his ear. He rubbed her cheek.

"I guess it make me more aware of what I didn't have in those ten years." Harry said.

"But Master!" Kesho slipped under his chin. "You must look forward not behind. Thou cannot crawl back into a skin once thou cast it away."

"I know. I try but I guess our brains think differently. We humans tend to dwell too much on the past I guess." Harry agreed.

"It is a wonder such a breed has survived all these centuries." Kesho marveled.

"A lot of people wonder that." Harry said sleepily. "There is a saying though," he yawned again. "Those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

"Perhaps, Master, perhaps. But it seems to take humans many repetitions before they remember." Kesho said, flicking her tongue on his cheek. "Sleep Master I will watch for you."

"Thanks, Kesho." Harry drifted off into the first quiet restful sleep he had in three days.

Pain didn't rouse him when Harry awoke several hours later, a muffled whistling noise made him sit up, causing Kesho, who still rested under his chin to hiss. "What's that sound?" Harry got to his feet. Although still very hungry Harry was surprised to find he felt almost normal.

"What sound Master?" Kesho laid her head on the floor. "I hear only the talk of the timber in the house and the speech of the earth."

"It's a high pitch whistling." Harry walked closer to his bed as he followed the sound. It was coming from his trunk. He opened it and started digging for the source of the noise.

"Ah, we runespoors do not hear high noises." Kesho told him.

"It's my sneakeroscope." Harry set it on the floor and the dark detector whirled on its tip. "Why would it be going off now?" It gave Harry an odd shiver down his spine. Finding a pair of socks Dobby the house elf had given him, Harry stuffed the sneakeroscope inside to muffle the sound and then he put them back in the trunk. "I'm going to the kitchen. Hopefully I'll be able to keep something down."

As Harry went down the stairs to the kitchen, he heard people in the drawing room. He paused and recognized Remus, Mr. Weasley, Tonks and Hermione's father's voices coming from the room. He paused curious at what was going on but so hungry he really didn't care. Giving into his hunger Harry hurried on to the kitchen. The instant he entered the kitchen his mouth started watering with the smell of the food.

"Harry!" Mr. Weasley hurried over. "How are you feeling?"

"Almost normal. I just need something to eat." Harry said slipping into an empty seat beside Hermione's mother. Several other places showed signs of eaten meals but the occupants had already left.

"What's going on in the drawing room?" Harry asked as he began piling his plate with food. Everyone at the table looked at each other.

"A surprise." Mrs. Weasley finally said pursing her lips slightly as if she didn't completely approve of whatever was happening. "Just something for Christmas."

"Yes, and don't you dare peek." Ginny warned him, smiling.

"Okay," Harry nodded and began eating. For some time he concentrated on his meal and when he looked up everyone was watching him with worried looks. Harry sighed. "I guess it hasn't been

much of a holiday for all of you. I'm really sorry I've made it so miserable."

"Don't be stupid!" Ginny said. "It's not your fault." Mrs. Weasley and Dr. Granger started to speak at the same time.

"You go first." Mrs. Weasley insisted. Dr. Granger nodded her thanks.

"Harry, if it hadn't been for you we wouldn't be celebrating a holiday at all." She put an arm around his shoulders and kissed his temple. "We owe you so much." Tears sprang to her eyes and she dabbed at them.

"I don't know about that. Dr. Granger." Harry shrugged. Ginny snorted at his attempt at modesty.

"Oh please call me Martha." Hermione's mother insisted.

"Uh, it doesn't sound very well, respectful." Harry felt his cheeks blush. Hermione was one of his best friends but he didn't know her mother and father well enough to feel comfortable calling them by their first names. And he didn't even call Ron's parents by their given names.

"Oh, you are a dear. I must say they teach such good manners at Hogwarts." She gave him another kiss and squeeze. "How about calling me Mrs. Granger then? I doubt if I do much dentistry here."

"That's better." Harry agreed giving her a smile. "Did you make the pie? It's really good but I noticed it's a little different than Mrs. Weasley's."

"Yes. I don't know if I can keep up with Molly's cooking." Mrs. Granger smiled Mrs. Weasley. "But I want to be useful around here not just a guest."

Harry stopped eating to look at her seriously. "Mrs. Granger you and Mr. Granger aren't guests here. Hermione's been one of my best friends since my first year at Hogwarts. You are family." He said firmly.

Instantly tears rolled down the woman's face and Hermione joined her mother in hugging Harry. "Thank you Harry. You are so sweet." Mrs. Granger wiped her eyes. Embarrassed Harry put up with the hugs and had to admit to himself he kind of liked the pleasant attention, especially after three very dark days.

Finally Harry leaned back in his chair feeling full. He hoped his meal would stay down for one day. "Ouch." This time the pain didn't cause him to clutch at his scar. Instead Harry looked under the table as Cleo climbed up his leg into his lap. "Your nails are sharp, Spy Cat!"

"Cleo! Where have you been?" Ginny leaned over and took cobwebs off the cat's long white whiskers. "Your paws are grey." Cleo purred into Harry's face making him sneeze from the dust on her face.

"Speaking of spies." Harry said. "Mrs. Weasley, who could check out my sneakeroscope? It's what woke me up. It was spinning and whistling like mad when I took it out of my trunk."

"Well, Remus could look at it." Mrs. Weasley said thoughtfully. "Could it be the runespoor?" She questioned.

"No, the trunk has been opened for almost a month and I didn't hear a sound from it before this." Harry reasoned.

"It is a cheap one." Ron said. "It's probably just gone haywire."

"Hermione told me about the runespoor." Mrs. Granger spoke the name as one not used to hearing it pronounced. "I would love to see her."

"You...you would?" Mrs. Weasley seemed shocked. "You like snakes?"

"I had two brothers that always had some reptile they were shaking in my face. It was either; be scared of them and be tormented or like them and completely spoil the boys' fun." Mrs. Granger laughed.

Harry had to smile, Mrs. Granger reminded him so much of Hermione. "Anytime you want to meet her she's up in my room.'

"We were going to wake you but the head under your chin hissed at us." Hermione said.

"That's Kesho." Harry said remembering their conversation before he had fallen asleep. "She doesn't say much but when she does speak...well...it makes me think."

"I'll clean up here if you want to see...it." Mrs. Weasley said and shook her head when Mrs. Granger offered to help. "No you go on it'll only take me a couple minutes."

In Harry's room Mrs. Granger knelt on the hearthrug to stroke the large serpent. "She's beautiful." Then she frowned. "She or they? Since there are three separate thinking heads...probably they." She glanced at Harry.

"They aren't too fussy about that. Or they haven't been. They don't like being called a snake." He gave Ron and Ginny a glance. The pair both rolled their eyes at their mother's fear.

"All of you are stunning." Mrs. Weasley told the runespoor. Hapa hissed and seemed to inflate. "Did I upset her?"

"No she said thank you." Harry laughed. "They do understand human speech. They just can't speak it."

"How wonderful you can talk to them." Mrs. Granger eyes glowed with the same eagerness Hermione's did in learning new things.

"Remus and I were going to write down some of her stories but we haven't had the time yet." Harry sighed. It was he that hadn't had the time.

"You know, I took shorthand in school. I thought I wanted to be a secretary but decided to be a dentist instead." Mrs. Granger told them. "I could help." They way the woman offered this made Harry realize

she was very afraid of not being able to do anything useful in a wizard's house.

"That would be great. I'm sure Remus wouldn't mind." Harry nodded. "I'll see you get some pens and pads of paper." He grinned at her. "Between you and me Mrs. Granger they are a lot better than quills, ink and parchment."

Snow fell past the window in thick fluffy flakes. Harry watched the peaceful swirls of white for a long time before getting dressed and going down for breakfast on Saturday morning. Only a slight soreness remained in his scar but to Harry it felt like nothing. He felt like he had just been cured from a long illness like when he had been sick in the summer.

The day was spent having fun with his friends, playing exploding snaps with Ron, Hermione and Ginny and wizard chess with Ron. This was the way the holiday was supposed to be. But underneath his smiles, Harry felt an uneasiness stirring. A fear of what Voldemort was going to do to Snape next and how it would affect him. Harry felt guilty thinking this even though it was Snape. Harry tried not to let his anxiety show but now and then he would see his friends looking at him with concern before they turned away.

Just before dinner Harry brought his camera to Remus so he could retrieve the pictures Mark Evans had taken before the dance. He passed the pictures to Ron's and Hermione's parents.

"Oh you girls are so beautiful." Mrs. Weasley became misty. "And so grown up. What wonderful couples the four of you make."

"I'll agree with you there Mrs. Weasley." Harry said nodding as he remembered Ginny and Hermione coming down the girls' stairs. "My mouth dropped open and hit the floor when I saw Ginny and Hermione."

"You look pretty snazzy yourself Harry." Tonks nudged his arm and winked. "I love those robes."

"Here are some more." Remus handed Harry some more photos.

"But Mark only took two" Harry said. To his surprise evidently Mark had snuck down to the dance and seemed to have taken a picture of Harry and Ginny anytime they were on the dance floor.

"Harry, you romantic devil." Tonks gave him a harder nudge at a picture of Harry and Ginny slow dancing with their eyes only for each other. Harry felt his face redden but he felt his heart swell as he remembering how perfect that evening had been.

"Could we get copies of these?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"Sure." Harry looked at Remus. "I think so."

"I'll see to it tomorrow." Remus nodded. "I have some things to pick up so I'll be out."

At dinner the photos were passed to everyone who came to eat. Harry felt he might as well paint his face red to save himself the bother of blushing all the time. The fact that Professor McGonagall had taught him how to dance seemed to have leaked out too. Although everyone said they guessed it from the picture of Harry dancing with his teacher.

After dinner, Remus and Tonks started putting on their traveling cloaks. "We have watch duty on the Burrow for the Order." Remus explained when Harry looked puzzled. "Until midnight."

"Be sure not to shoot too many breezes." Harry grinned. It was Lupin's turned to flush but since he busied himself wrapping a Mrs. Weasley's hand knitted muffler around his neck nobody seemed to notice. Remus grabbed Harry's neck and shook him a bit. Harry laughed and ducked out of his grip. "Go on. Keep warm."

"Don't worry Harry. I'll keep him warm." Tonks said without a hint of embarrassment. The pair left the kitchen with ahs from the girls and

whoops from Fred and George. But as Harry watched Remus's back disappear he had a strange feeling that made the smile leave his face.

"Remus?" Harry bolted from the kitchen and caught up with them at the front door. "Be careful tonight okay?" Harry grabbed Lupin's arm. "Extra careful. I know you have to do your part but..."

"You feel something?" Remus stared at him seriously.

"Yeah. I don't know what it means. But it can't be anything good." Harry glanced at Tonks' worried face.

"Don't worry Harry. I'll take good care of him." Tonks patted him on the shoulder. "We have to go." She gave his arm a squeeze. "We'll be fine Harry." Tonks opened the door and a flurry of snow blew into the entryway. But when the door shut with its many bolts and locks now clicking shut automatically Harry wanted to run out after them and beg Remus not to go.

In the middle of the night, the runespoor slid onto Harry's bed. "Something is happening down in the stone room." Hapa hissed in his ear. "I think you should go."

Sitting up and reaching for his glasses Harry shoved his feet into his slippers. "What's going on?"

"Ssss. I don't know. Don't you feel the tension? Don't you taste it?" Hapa asked.

Harry stared at her for a moment and shook his head. Without another word he made his way down the stairs to the basement kitchen. A low rumbling voice Harry recognized as Kingsley Shacklebolt's made its way through the door. Harry pushed open the door. His heart sank as he saw Albus Dumbledore trying to comfort Tonks who seemed to be sobbing into her hands. Mrs. Weasley was in tears and Mr. Weasley looked unusually grave. Without even looking around Harry knew Remus was not there.

"What's happened?" Harry demanded taking a place across from Dumbledore, the table between them.

"Sit down Harry." Dumbledore suggested but when Harry just glared at him he said. "Remus has been taken by the Death Eaters."

"Is he dead?" Harry asked with his eyes closed his breaths coming in long shudders.

"We don't know. But he was the target. Once they had stunned him the death eaters grabbed him and disappeared." Dumbledore said.

Hands on his shoulder made Harry jumped. Mr. Weasley couldn't keep Harry's body from shaking though. Tears ran down Harry's face and Mr. Weasley forced him into a chair. He tried to form more questions but Harry found his throat had tightened beyond speech. He just shook his head in denial. A second later he ran from the kitchen up to his room ignoring the calls behind him.

For the first time in months Harry went searching for Voldemort's mind. The emotions of the dark wizard ran high and Harry had no trouble finding an entrance.

"Ah Harry Potter, you've come to witness the meeting of old friends." Voldemort stood in the dark dungeon where Snape still hung from the ceiling by his wrists. One torch flickered dimly at the side of the entrance. The door creaked open and two dark shapes dragging a limp form between them pushed through the doorway. They heaved the unconscious man against the wall. One waved a wand and a manacle attached itself to the leg of the prisoner.

"Good. Let's have a reunion now. Ennervate!" Voldemort pointed his wand and revived the prone figure. A low groan issued from the man. Slowly he sat up and raised his head to look at Voldemort. Harry gasped. Remus! "Yes." Voldemort laughed quite pleased with himself. He walked over to stand in front of Snape.

"Do you see how kind I am Severus?" Snape's eyes slowly found the Dark Lord's face. "Not only do I give you an old classmate as company but Tuesday the twenty fourth is full moon and so you will

also have a pet." Voldemort smirked as the look of horror filled Snape's face.

"You're worst nightmare isn't it?" Voldemort laughed. "Once he bites you, every month you will transform into a werewolf. I've heard it's quite painful." Voldemort turned to Lupin who stared as horrified as Snape. "Regrettably, I can only stand to keep one werewolf about and once your services have been rendered, young Malfoy will get to practice his dark spells on you since he was denied the use of the muggles and the mudblood."

Harry screamed "No!" In his head or aloud he didn't know. Fighting the hands that tried to hold him down Harry cried. "Remus, I can't lose you too!"

Author's Notes: Reviews!!! I love them!! Thanks!!

I know it's another cliffhanger; it was either post it now or not until Wednesday or later and I couldn't make you wait that long.

Review this Story/Chapter

Chapter 33

The telling of Voldemort's plans, although uncomplicated, took Harry a long time to recount to Dumbledore and a large number of the Order members standing in the kitchen. Harry couldn't look at any of them, afraid they would see he wished it was any one of them instead of Remus. Tonks sat beside him, no longer crying but pale and strangely quiet.

"How horrible," Hestia Jones, shook her head. "How utterly horrible."

"You are going to look for him?" Harry finally looked at the headmaster. "We have to find him."

"Harry we have searched." Dumbledore sighed. "The Order has been looking ever since Severus Snape was taken. Every dark wizard we know of has been visited by the Order but we do not know where else to search."

"Search them again." Harry insisted.

"If the Dark Lord has used the fidelius charm we have no chance in finding the location." Kingsley Shacklebolt said."

"So you are just going to give up?" Harry felt his anger rising along with his fear. He glanced around at the order members. From their expressions, all including the Weasleys obviously had accepted the fact Remus Lupin was going to die and there was nothing they could do about it.

"No Harry we aren't giving up." Dumbledore sighed again. "But I have little hope of getting to either man in time."

Totally numb Harry sat staring at the old wizard. Didn't he feel anything? Harry wondered angrily. Maybe Dumbledore had seen so much death in his long life it didn't affect him any more. Harry closed his eyes wanting to run from the room again. Not really listening Harry heard members of the Order expressing their sympathy to him and the anger surged in him again.

"Stop it!" Harry sprung to his feet. "You talk like Remus is already dead. It's making me sick." He turned to leave but Tonks caught his arm.

"Think about it Harry. Even if we do find where Remus and Severus are being held, would either want one of us to die to save them?" Tonks said softly, she kept a firm grip on his arm. "Yes, I know either one would die to save us but charging into you-know-who's stronghold isn't one of the things they'd expect us to do nor would they want us to do it."

"There are too few of us in the Order to risk so many for so few." Kingsley said grimly.

"I love Remus too Harry." Tonks' eyes welled up with tears. "But I wouldn't forsake his trust in me to protect the work of the order."

Swallowing hard, Harry put his hand on the one on his arm. "I know I'm not the only one to care about Remus." Harry closed his eyes because he couldn't stand the pain in Tonks' face. "But I am the only one who I will have to witness his death." Harry heard Tonks give a slight sob and she pulled away. He opened his eyes to see the kitchen door swing close and many eyes glaring at him. Nobody said a word to him but their looks spoke volumes so Harry followed after Tonks.

He found her in the same library Ginny had been searching through. "Tonks, I'm sorry. It was a stupid thing to say."

"But true." She kept her back to him. Harry could tell she was still crying. "You didn't know...he asked me to marry him...that night." Tonks sniffed and took a deep breath.

"No, I didn't know but I didn't think he could marry." Harry stepped closer and saw her shoulders shake.

"Not legally in the eyes of the ministry of magic. But a wedding with friends around us would be just as good to ...us." Tonks put her face in her hands. "If we had listened to you that night. I couldn't stop them

from taking him." She rubbed her face and Harry put his hands on her shoulders.

"I'm glad he has you." Harry didn't want to put Remus in past tense. "I never saw him happier." Tonks turned her face streaked with tears and her eyes puffy.

"He loved your letters to him. It really surprised him that you wrote to him." Tonks wiped the tears leaking down her cheeks.

"I was reminded by Ginny I did have someone to write to." Harry fought hard not to start crying too. Tonks looked down at the floor.

"I would give anything just to see him again, Harry. Even if I had to be there..." She gave a sob. "I would want to be there for him." With these words Harry lost his battle, tears started down his face.

"You wouldn't want to see him like this. He wouldn't want you to either." Harry shook his head. "The only way he knows I'm there is if Voldemort says he knows I'm in his mind." Harry told her. "I can't talk to him. He can't see me. I'll just see his misery and feel the pleasure that bastard gets from hurting the both of them." Harry felt Tonks arms go around his waist and he wrapped his arms around her shaking body. "I can't lose him Tonks. I just can't. I've lost too much."

"There's no hope in finding him Harry." Tonks shuddered. "Like Kingsley said, if the location is hidden in a secret keeper nobody would be able to find the place." They held each other for a long time and Harry let his tears fall. "We're getting each other all wet." Tonks sniffed as she pulled away a little, wiping the wet spot on Harry's shirt.

"Don't worry, I drip dry." Harry wiped the tears from her cheek with his thumb. "What are we going to do?" He asked softly.

"Survive." Tonks whispered.

Feeling totally worn out Harry climbed the stairs to his room. After he had walked Tonks back to the kitchen door, she had told him to go on,

that she would tell everyone he had apologized sufficiently to her. He was grateful. He hadn't wanted to face all those people again. When he reached his door Harry found it slightly ajar. He pushed it open and Ron, Hermione and Ginny was sitting on his bed.

"What are you three doing here?" Harry tried not to sound irritated as he walked over to the foot of the bed. He had wanted to be alone.

"Waiting for you." Ron said his voice strained. "We know what's going on. Dad came up and told us."

"So we thought we'd head you off before you crawled into a hole where we couldn't find you." Hermione eyes were red but she wasn't crying.

"Harry." Ginny slid to the edge of the bed and looked into Harry's eyes.. "Is it really true? What they say about..." She swallowed hard then whispered. "About Remus?"

Harry nodded feeling his throat tighten again. Taking a deep breath and forcing his tears back he managed. "Yes." Harry glanced over to the bed to see tears running down Hermione's face as Ron held her and rubbed a fist over his eyes. Tears stood in Ginny's eyes so Harry put a hand out and pulled her into his arms. She buried her face into his chest and cried. When she noticed he wasn't she seemed worried.

"It's okay Harry. I've seen you cry before." Ginny whispered to him. "You don't have to hold back."

"I just cried a river with Tonks." Harry gave Ginny a squeeze. "I was my usually tactless self and had to apologize to her. Did you know Remus asked her to marry him?"

"What?" Ron and Hermione both gasped.

"But werewolves can't marry." Ginny said.

"Tonks didn't care. She said a wedding with just friends around them would suit her. Damn the ministry's stupid laws and regulations." Harry sighed and pulled Ginny so they could sit on the bed with Ron and Hermione.

"You were right Hermione. I wanted to come in here and be alone." She gave him a Ron a satisfied look of being right again. "But I have to admit having all of you here is much better. I don't like the company I keep when I'm alone." He rubbed his neck as the three figured out what he meant.

"I'm glad we are better company than you-know-who." Ginny snorted. "Maybe we should let you get some sleep." She said when Harry yawned. "Or better yet, we can tuck you in!"

"No problem, I've done it lots of time." Ron grabbed Harry left arm and Ginny grabbed his right pulling him toward the pillow end of the bed.

"Oh good. I get his huge stinky feet." Hermione laughed through her tears and pulled at Harry's shoes.

"Hey!" Harry laughed. "Untie them first Hermione, you're going to pull my feet off." The silliness that ensued was just what Harry wanted and needed as did Ron, Hermione and Ginny. None of them want to think about Remus or Voldemort or the horrible events to come. With much huffing and puffing and a lot of laughing and a couple of bumped heads later Harry was so tightly tucked under the blankets he couldn't move. Any time he tried to loosen the blankets one of them would pounce and snug them up again. "Okay okay. I give up." Harry panted. "So do I get a bedtime story?"

"I will tell a story master." Hapa rose from the floor at the foot of the bed and flowed onto the bed.

"Hapa is going to tell a story." Harry would have nudged them to be quiet but he couldn't move.

"But we should be in bed too if it is a bedtime story." Ginny said. Then she pulled back the tightly tucked covers and slid in beside Harry.

"Ginny!" Ron looked shocked. "You can't do that..."

"Oh get a grip Ron." Ginny glared at him. "You and Hermione are here...we are fully clothed...like anything is going to happen."

"Yes, Ron get a grip." Hermione grinned and slid in on the other side of Harry, whose face was bright red.

"Fine!" Ron snorted and slid in beside Hermione grinning. "This looks weird."

"I think we're ready Hapa." Harry laughed.

"Don't jiggle the bed, Harry. I'm hanging on the edge. Scoot over a bit Ginny." Ron complained.

"How's that." Ginny said as everyone shifted.

"Great. Okay Hapa, fire away." Ron nestled against Hermione with a sigh.

The great orange head hissed at him. "Hapa, could you tell why runespoor and phoenixes don't get along?" Harry asked in normal speech so the others could understand what was said.

"Sssss. That is not a tale for to dream on. It is filled with much death." Hapa answered annoyed.

"I take it she didn't like that suggestion?" Ron snorted.

"You got that right. She says it isn't a bedtime story. Alright Hapa, I'll trust you to come up with a good story. We're ready when you are." Harry felt Ginny's arm across his chest and he sighed with contentment.

"This tale was told by the great griffon Naduwa before the writings of wizards and men." Hapa began. "Long ago, a large but isolated town fell in the hunting path of Keerashe, the griffon of Mount Takarn. Small humans were easy prey for the griffon and he enjoyed the sweet meat." Harry echoed the story to the others as she went.

"Eeeww." Ginny scrunched up her nose. "And this is a bedtime story?" Hapa hissed at her for interrupting and Ginny need no interpretation from Harry of the runespoor's meaning. "Sorry Hapa." She said contritely.

"The town suffered their losses greatly. And a messenger was sent to the wizards for help." Hapa continued. "Back then the wizards would help the non-magical folk...for a price. The price the wizards wanted was too much for the village so they sought another solution."

"There were many skilled tradesmen in this town. Many traveled far to the town for the cloth they wove. With many able hands, the people took to the forest to gather the silky downy hair cast off by the demiguise, many dwelt there peacefully. As you may not know the demiguise can become invisible and its hair is used to make invisibility cloaks." Hapa told them.

"The spinner of the town made a strong unbreakable cord with the demiguise's fur. Then the fisher folk constructed a net of great size with the cord. Once the net was finished it was impossible to see at a distance. The other tradesmen, the forger of metal, the leather crafter and the builder constructed an ingenious trap using the net. But the last item was harder to come by, bait. How to bait the trap? No one wanted to use a child so a brave young mudder, Batti, volunteered."

"Mudder?" Harry asked when Ginny nudge him. She evidently didn't want to interrupt again.

"An apprentice to the potters' trade. Their duty as I understand it is to gather and work the clay for the potters." Hapa explained. "So the trap was set and the village waited several days before the griffon returned. Seeing a small human so enticingly place, the griffon dove in to take the bait. Not seeing the net, the trap sprung with a snap and the great griffon lay helpless on the ground, struggling against the tight cords around its legs and neck."

"It took all the Batti's courage not to run when the griffon attacked. Now he stood watching the griffon thrash about making a horrible screeching cry. A town hunter hurried from his hut with bow and arrow in hand. But one look of those furious eyes and the blood

chilling scream, the hunter blanched in terror, dropped his bow and ran."

"Over the next week, many came to kill the griffon but its terrifying cry and daunting stare made the bravest men in the village quail with fear and none dared to go near it. The young Batti grew angry. The griffon deserved to die. It had taken his beloved sister Leticia, to whom he was both mother and father, their own parents having died in a winter sickness. In secret the Batti forged a crude sword to use to slay the beast."

"When the sword was finished and Batti stood beside the captured griffon. He found the screeching did not chill his heart. The eagle head turned and gazed unblinkingly into the young man's face. Instead of feeling fear, Batti became angry."

"You took my sister Leticia, for this you must die." Batti raised the sword to strike a fatal blow.

"Your sister had green eyes." Keerashe eyed him. "I did not kill her."

"You speak?" Batti let his sword drop to the ground and backed away. "What do you mean you did not kill her? I saw you take her." His courage grew again and he grabbed up the weapon.

"I remember your sister well, a small creature of great courage and bright green eyes. She is the reason I speak with you now." Keerashe said. I did take her to my nest to feed to my fledgling but as I clasped her in my talons I saw her delight in soaring over the land. She gazed up at me and was not afraid."

"That is Leticia. She was never afraid of anything." Batti eyes stung and he lifted the sword. "I will revenge her death."

"I told you, I did not kill her. I landed away from my young to examine this creature more closely. She actually reached out a small hand and patted me. Then she spoke to me." Keerashe said this with as much surprise as Batti had finding the griffon could speak.

"Of course we can speak. How could you not know that?" Batti said hotly.

"Does one ask the hare to chat?" Keerashe asked simply. "I am from Mont Takarn I know little of creatures such as yourself. All I ever saw was a meal nothing more. But this child, your sister, Leticia you say? Leticia had the courage of a griffon." There was amusement in the griffon's words. "I could not feed her to my young. And I now realized my error I would not hunt such creatures again. I told her this so she could tell her people." Sadness came over the great beast. "I was flying her back here, to her home when I heard the twang of a hunter's bow. I easily evaded the arrow but in horror I felt the small body in my talons go limp. The arrow had pierced her great bold heart."

Batti let the sword fall again. "Where is her body?" He feared the worst.

"I gave her to the sea on the other side of Mont Takarn. One so brave will not be afraid of the next adventure." Keerashe said. "What is your name brave brother of Leticia?"

"I am Batti." He looked at the bound griffon. Batti picked up his sword and with a stroke of its blade set the creature free. "Go. I will not kill you. I don't think I ever could have."

Keerashe shook his body free of the net and leather bindings with a flap of his great wings. With a triumphant screech the griffon half flew and half padded up to the young man. Shrinking away thinking Batti thought he might have made a mistake. "Fear not Batti. Look at me." The griffon commanded.

Reluctantly Batti stared into the golden eyes. He felt his body freeze and his eyes stung and watered. Then he broke the gaze and fell backward to the ground. Another scream from the Griffon made him turn his stinging eyes away to the grass. Any moment he knew he would feel a stabbing blow from that sharp yellow beak. Something sticky rasped the back of his head making his hair stand on end. Then Batti felt the nibbling of a beak, very gently on his ear.

"Stand Batti." Keerashe urged. When the young man had risen to his feet the griffon laid his beak on his shoulder. "I grieve with thee for the loss of your sister. I have given you her eyes and the far seeing sight of a Griffon. Go look in the pool."

Batti ran to the pond and dropped to his knees. Leaning over to see his reflection he gasped. His eyes once brown were now bright green like his sister's had been. He sat back and stared at the griffon. "Why? I don't understand."

"Courage of the heart is very rare. I too would preserve what I can." Keerashe stepped back and bowed to Batti. "When in need of my help, call, I will listen, I will hear." With a down stroke of his large wings Keerashe took flight. "Fair you well, Batti, brother of Leticia, daughter of courage."

For a long time Batti watched the griffon fly to the mountains and realized he could see farther than he ever could have before. He glanced down at where he had dropped his sword his mouth dropped open. Glittering and shimmering in the sun, there were now large rubies inset in the handle."

"I suppose all Batti's descendants have green eyes and hair that stick up in the back." Snorted Ron.

Giza raised her head and hissed at Ron, making Harry laugh. "She said, it would be refreshing if you would think before you spoke. Or at in the least listen for the end of the story before commenting." Harry felt Hermione stifle a laugh and Ginny giggled. "Go on Hapa, or is that the end?"

"A story never truly ends. But no, Batti did not pass on the green eyes to his children. The green eyes of Leticia and the kiss of the griffon are very rare." Hapa looked at Harry. "It is has been said when the green eyes of Leticia and the kiss of the griffon come together again no power can daunt the heart of such a person."

Hedwig fidgeted on top of her cage, a blur of white in the dark room. Harry heard footsteps going down the stairs. If he listened hard enough, he could hear the creaking of the house. The surges of contentment and satisfied pleasure were not his. Voldemort was no doubt immensely pleased with himself. Harry hesitated searching for Voldemort's mind, dreading what he would see or hear but still yearning to know what was happening. In that moment Harry realized no one had told him not to contact Voldemort, not even Dumbledore. Taking a deep breath Harry closed his eyes and opened his mind, feeling his way along the emotions which didn't belong to him.

He was walking along a dark stone passageway, only lit by scantily placed torches. Several doors on either side, with bars on a small square opening at the bottom, flickered past in the dim light from a lit wand. The last door had no openings. The wand tapped it and the door creaked open. A long pale shape hung from the ceiling, another naked man lay shivering against the stone wall opposite the door.

"How goes the reunion Severus." Voldemort asked. "Catching up on old times no doubt." Eyes from the man on the floor glinted with the light from the wand. He watched Voldemort warily as the dark wizard circled Snape.

"You seem to be losing a bit of weight Severus?" Voldemort ran a fingernail down each jutting rib. "No matter, once you are a werewolf the vermin in the place should keep you fit." He turned to Lupin. "By now young Potter has told all who think they are more powerful than I about your situation. I have..." Voldemort paused. "Ah, Harry Potter is back with us. Is there anything you would like to say to the boy?"

"Tell him," Remus voice croaked with emotion. "Tell him, I'm sorry I won't be there to see him turn you into dust." He finished angrily. Voldemort roared with laughter but he couldn't hide his anger and fear from Harry.

"Very humorous but a statement like that can not go unpunished." Voldemort said pointing his wand at Lupin. "Crucio." Remus screamed and writhed on the floor, his ankle chain clanking. Harry gritted his teeth against the echoing surge of pain in his scar. Desperately Harry pushed farther into Voldemort's mind trying to find

out where they were, but Voldemort felt his intrusion and stopped his progress.

"How touching. Potter is trying to find you." Voldemort lifted his wand and Lupin lay panting without looking up. "He didn't try that hard when it was just you, Severus. He does play favorites doesn't he?" Voldemort walked back around Snape, once again circling like a vulture. "But I don't play favorites with my prisoners. What one gets the other also deserves. Crucio." The man hanging jerked and twitched in agony and a strangled hoarse cry came from him. Voldemort lowered his wand. "You still have a bit of life in you Severus." The thin spidery hand patted the bare back with a loud smack.

"I do hope you will come around for the full moon Harry Potter." Voldemort started circling again. "It should be most entertaining. Although I haven't decided if I should just give the werewolf enough chain to bite Severus or if would it be more enjoyable to let them loose in a large and of course inescapable area so the beast could hunt him down." Voldemort paused thinking. "It does sound a bit more sporting that way. But then again, the hunt isn't the real reason for it."

"What is the reason for doing that to him?" Harry asked.

"I thought that was obvious." Voldemort seemed surprised by the question. "I do it not only to humiliate the man, but to watch every month his transformation to a werewolf." Voldemort turned to Lupin. "Tell me, werewolf, what is the most painful part of changing, the hands curling into paws or the face elongating into a snout?" When Lupin didn't answer Voldemort laughed. "Oh well, Severus will tell me won't you?"

Feeling sick and repulsed by Voldemort's happiness, Harry wanted desperately to end his contact but even more desperately did he want to find out where the men were held. He tried again to search Voldemort's mind.

"You are wasting your time, Potter." Voldemort easily blocked his probing. "I used the fidelius charm to hide this place and the secret

keeper is so well hidden you could walk by him and never even see him."

Another surge of extreme delight issued from Voldemort. It made Harry uneasy. He made one last request of the dark wizard before he broke contact. "Tell them to be ready." And with the laughter of Voldemort in his brain Harry pulled away.

Finding himself in his own bed and the night still around him, Harry sat up shaking. What did Voldemort mean I could walk by him and never see him? Harry was sure there was something hidden in those words that pleased Voldemort to no good end. Slipping into his dressing gown Harry paced his room for a time, thinking. His eyes drifted to his school trunk and he thought of the sneakoscope inside, muffled from giving an alert. Why had that gone off suddenly? Or more important when had it gone off? Not when he had first come to Grimmauld Place for the holidays. Harry thought back, so all who were here at that time wasn't suspect. Stopping at his desk Harry took a fresh piece of parchment and started writing down names. Everyone he could remember seeing in the house at the time of his and Ginny's arrival.

Checking the calendar Harry wrote down dates of peoples' arrival and events that happened since returning to number 12 Grimmauld Place seven short days ago. For several minutes Harry kept at it not really looking at the results as he made his listings. Finally Harry stopped to compare the people whose name first appeared after the sneakoscope went off. It felt like a lead weight dropping in his stomach as Harry stared at four names, Ron, Hermione, Robert Granger and Martha Granger. Their arrival coincided with the sneakoscope's warning.

Harry dropped the quill and leaned his head on his hands. Could he suspect Ron and Hermione? He closed his eyes and the dread in his stomach threatened to grow. Taking a deep breath and raising his head from his hands Harry said out loud. "No." If he couldn't trust Ron and Hermione he might as well give up right now to Voldemort. Then the two other names seemed to stare at him, Hermione's parents. What if one of Hermione's parent's was a death eater using polyjuice

potion like Crouch did two years ago. Or being perhaps one was being controlled by the imperious curse?

Harry needed to talk to someone. His mind went to Lupin and he felt a pang of great loss. Who else could he go to about this? Harry looked at the door thinking. Hermione and Ron were out. As much logic as was in his conclusion, Harry didn't think Hermione would even consider the possibility of her parents being spies. Ginny? He'd be cursed into oblivion if he was caught in Ginny's room at this time of night, that's assuming he could even enter it now.

Mr. Weasley seemed the most likely person to go to so Harry quietly open the door to his room and started toward their bedroom. But then Harry caught a glimpse of Mrs. Weasley going into the drawing room in her dressing gown. Harry hurried down the stairs after her but stopped at the door when he heard Mr. Weasley answering her question.

"Why are you up at this hour Arthur?"

"I couldn't sleep Molly, so I thought I'd try to get this working." Mr. Weasley sounded tired.

"Why Arthur? Robert said he would help with that muggle stuff in the morning." There wasn't any of the exasperation that normally came from Mrs. Weasley when speaking of muggle things and Mr. Weasley messing with them.

"I want to make sure it will work, for Remus's sake. I owe him that." Mr. Weasley's voice broke. He cleared his throat and sniffed. "Harry isn't the only one who will miss Remus. He's become a good friend." Harry stood by the door and silent tears started down his face. He heard Mr. Weasley sigh. "Many a good talk I had with him since we came to live here. It's been a long time since I've had such intelligent conversations with man that didn't call me dad."

"He is such a dear man." Mrs. Weasley agreed. "He told me Harry's parents argued about who would be godfather to Harry. Lily wanted Remus and James wanted Sirius. In the end Remus told them a werewolf was not a proper godparent for a child."

"Sirius was a good man too. But I've become quite close to Remus." Mr. Weasley sighed again.

"I know, I'll miss him too." Mrs. Weasley voice sounded sad but not tearful. "Remus is such a gentleman, I hate how..."

"Let's not speak of it Molly. I don't want to think of it now." Mr. Weasley said then with a surprise in his voice he added. "Molly what are you doing?"

"Making you feel better." Her voice was low. Harry's brow furrowed in puzzlement as he wiped the tears from his face. But when a low sigh of pleasure issued from Mr. Weasley his face went red hot.

"Mmm... You always did know how to cheer me up." Mr. Weasley said in a husky voice. Harry was afraid to move, the floor squeaked so badly around the drawing room door.

After many sighs and murmurs of pleasure Mrs. Weasley said. "Arthur we should go to our room. What if one of the children hears us?" She gave a moan of pleasure.

"I hope they have good enough manners to turn around and leave us be." Mr. Weasley gave a sigh. Harry had heard enough. Hoping they were too occupied with each other to pay any attention to the floor squeaking Harry tiptoed quickly back up the stairs.

At the stairs Harry saw a light through the key hole from Fred and George's room. Still needing someone to talk to Harry climbed the stair to their room and knocked softly on the door. "It's Harry, can I talk to you two?"

"Sure come in." Fred opened the door but he was sitting at a desk next to a bed. George lay fully clothed on his bed, raised up a bit to see Harry come in.

"What's up?" George asked. Quickly Harry explained about the sneakoscope and Voldemort's strange tone and talk about his secret keeper.

"Could it be one of the Grangers?" Harry finished.

"Not bad reasoning." Fred tapped a quill on the desk then cursed as the tip bent.

"But still a bit flawed though" George sat up. "There are spells on this place that would counter-act anyone under the imperious curse."

"And to be using polyjuice they would have to keep the person they were impersonating some where close by so they could get a piece of them now and then." Fred said.

"Crouch kept Moody in his own trunk. The same thing could be done to one of the Grangers." Harry insisted.

"But Kingsley packed Mr. Granger's suitcases. And Remus did Mrs. Granger's things." George reminded him. "I don't see how they would have missed a thing like that."

"That and I have seen Crookshanks sitting on both of their laps and he's got a pretty good nose for impostors." Fred added.

"On the other hand, I think the sneakoscope going off at their arrival could be significant." George nodded.

"Maybe you should tell Moody of your findings." Fred suggested.

"He doesn't trust me much anymore." Harry shook his head remembering his last meeting with the old Auror.

"He doesn't trust anyone Harry." George snorted but then seriously he said. "Tomorrow let's search through Ron and Hermione's trunk, with their permission, Harry." George rolled his eyes at such niceties.

"And if they will consent the Granger's stuff." Fred suggested.

"Looking for what?" Harry asked but actually liking the idea of doing something.

"Anything that's out of place." George said.

"Anything that doesn't belong to them." Fred added.

"Oh like the airlines asking if you packed your own ...bag." Harry drifted off at the twins' look of confusion. "Never mind. Hey, thanks for listening to me."

"No problem. I'm surprised you didn't go to Dad." George slid off the bed and opened his wardrobe, pulling out pajamas.

"Well, I was going to." Harry's face went red. "But he was...busy."

"Are they at it again?" Fred snorted seeing Harry blushing. "It's a wonder there are only seven of us."

Author's notes: I know you thought this would be the rescue or demise chapter but it didn't work out that way. So as once advised I went with it.

A couple people asked if I knew how long this was going to be...nope not a clue. No schedule for posting either. ;p)

Chapter 34

A shrill scream woke Harry in the morning. He sat up, his heart pounding. With the noise of the scream Mrs. Black's portrait woke and added her screeches to the din. His name was called through the racket, although the call wasn't frantic nor was it coming from the person screaming. Jumping out of bed, Harry hurried down the stairs and heard the scream again. "Mrs. Weasley?"

"Harry, can you take the runespoor up to your room?" Mr. Weasley asked. "It scared the daylights out of Molly." Harry noticed both Weasley's were still in their dressing gowns.

"Sure, I'm sorry Mrs. Weasley." The poor woman was trying to flatten herself into the corner as the runespoor kept circling the drawing room, hissing. Then speaking to the serpent Harry said. "Why are you down here? And how did you get out of my room?"

The runespoor hissed in irritation, flicking her tongue in and out. "I smell a rat." The long tail flicked knocking over a stand.

"Look, if you are hungry I'll get you something to eat. You have to go back. You're scaring Mrs. Weasley." Harry darted in front of the circling runespoor to stop its progress. "I said go back to my room, please." Giza hissed at him.

"By your command." Hapa said softly. She led the two other heads to the wall next to Mrs. Weasley who whimpered in terror. Using her blunt nose Hapa flicked aside a panel and slowly slithered out of sight.

"I guess that explains how she left my room with the door shut." Harry mused, then turning to the frightened woman. "I'm sorry Mrs. Weasley. She smelled a rat. Are you alright?" He held out his hand to pull her into the middle of the room. Someone had silenced the portrait in the hallway and house became quiet again.

"I'm fine. I think. Goodness knows how many of those hidden panels are around here." Mrs. Weasley looked suspiciously around the room. "That thing could turn up anywhere any time." The thought alone was enough to set Mrs. Weasley into another state of panic.

"I'll tell her not to enter any room you are in Mrs. Weasley. Will that help?" Harry patted her arm looking at Mr. Weasley to get him to help calm his wife.

"Couldn't she just stay in your room? If I walk in on it...eating." Mrs. Weasley shuddered then her eyes blazed. "Another rat in this place? I'm sure I got rid of the lot of them."

"Probably one or two came in for the winter from outside Molly." Mr. Weasley seemed like he would rather deal with an angry wife than a frightened one.

Now the whole house was a wake Mrs. Weasley bustled off to the kitchen with Mrs. Granger to get breakfast. Harry went back upstairs to get dressed. As he tied his laces on his shoes he wondered how to approach Ron and Hermione about looking through their trunks.

To Harry's surprise Dumbledore was sitting at the kitchen table eating a plate of pancakes trying to keep his beard out of the syrup. "How did you sleep Harry?" The headmaster asked cautiously.

Harry shrugged as he sat down beside George and thanked Mrs. Granger for the pancakes she had placed in front of him. After pouring syrup over the stack Harry toyed with his food suddenly not very hungry. "I'm surprised you didn't tell me not to contact Voldemort last night." Harry commented.

Dumbledore paused from taking a bite and raised his eyebrows. "I doubted very much if you would have listened to such advice. Am I correct?"

"Yes," Harry almost laughed. At least the headmaster had enough sense to accept the inevitable.

Chewing thoughtfully, Dumbledore nodded. "In any case, you are our only link to Severus and Remus. We have little hope but a little hope is better than none." He sighed sadly.

"We have a saying, I don't know if you've heard it. 'Where there's life there's hope.'." Mrs. Granger said.

"Very profound though Martha. Yes, life is hope." Dumbledore nodded and smiled at her, but for a split second, Harry saw pain in those blue eyes, pain and a fear for his friends. "Fred and George have been telling me about your sneakoscope and your suspicions."

"We didn't think you would mind us running it by him." George said when Harry gave them a sharp look.

"You didn't say to keep it quiet." Fred said defensively.

"I don't mind. Not really. It just took me by surprise I guess." Harry assured them. He had forgotten to factor in Fred and George and by the time Harry had told Dumbledore about his most recent visit with Voldemort, the twins had permission to search the trunks.

"I do not think any person in this house is a spy for Voldemort." Dumbledore said firmly. "However, I too think the timing of the sneakoscope's alert worthy of looking into."

"Finish your breakfast Harry and we'll check out the trunks." Ron urged him.

"Yeah, we get to do Hermione's." George said a bit too eager.

"I'll be watching every second." Hermione glared at them. "Just remember I might have hexed stuff at school." The twins eyes grew large and two identical grins spread across their faces.

"We wouldn't do anything to your stuff." Fred said innocently.

"Yeah, we saw Marietta Edgecombe last year. Pretty impressive, wouldn't cross you Hermione." George said earnestly. Hermione continued to eye the twins, who glanced at each other a few times and then made a production of finishing their breakfast.

"Yes, well, I'll leave you all to search. Please inform me if you find anything you would consider out of the ordinary." Dumbledore's voice

was serious but a smile twitched at his lips on hearing Hermione was responsible for the sneak hex last year.

A few minutes later, Harry, Hermione, Ginny, George and Fred stood around Ron's trunk as he took out every item and handed it to one of the group to look over. Harry watched Hermione biting her lip holding back the remarks she wanted to say about the disorganization inside the trunk. Or perhaps offers of advice to keep it neater, Harry thought.

"Nice job packing Ron." George had no such problems commenting.

"I didn't pack this, Dumbledore did remember?" Ron said hotly

"Good thing you didn't tip him." Fred snorted. Ron chuckled a balled up set of robes at him. He caught it easily and shook it out. "Yuck. Has this been in there since you had that rat?"

"No," Ron turned. "Those are this year's robes. Why?"

"Looks like rat hair to me. Or are you seeing someone with grey hair?" Fred showed him. Everyone leaned in to look at the stray hairs on the black robe.

"Where would that come from?" Ron frowned.

"It's too short to be Dumbledore's. Could it be Remus's?" Ginny asked. "Maybe he helped pack Ron's trunk."

"I don't think so. Remus's hair is mixed with grey but longer than that." Hermione said.

"Well, that's all there is." Ron said straightening up and showing the empty trunk.

Harry leaned over to feel the bottom of the trunk and it was solid. He glanced at the inside front as he felt the sides. Near the lock plate were four tiny parallel close set scratches. Frowning Harry stuck his nose closer to examine the marks.

"Did you find something?" Fred asked.

"I don't know. Do you have a magnifying glass?" Harry looked up to see a puzzled look on all wizards' face.

"I have one Harry." Hermione hurried out of the room and was soon back with the magnifying glass. She handed it to Harry.

"Thanks. These marks, they look fresh." Harry's voice was muffled inside the trunk.

"Let me see." Hermione tapped him and exchanged places with him. "You're right. There's no oxidation on the scratches so they are recent." She stood up and handed the magnifying glass to Fred who looked through it at her and jumped back. She slapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the trunk, glaring.

"I concur with Harry and Hermione. These are scratches." Fred snorted. "Something in the trunk could have made these. Like a comb or something."

"No comb here." Ginny pointed to the stuff on the bed. "If something made the marks it should be here and match the scratches." They examined each item but found nothing that would make lines like the marks on the trunk.

"Well, let's try Hermione's trunk maybe she has scratches too." George gave a little snort.

"Hey aren't you going to help put this stuff back?" Ron complained.

"Oh, sure." Fred took out his wand and raised it. "Pack." All the things flew back in the trunk, a worse state than before. "Ah well, at least it's all in. You can straighten it later."

"I might as well packed it myself." Ron grumbled to Harry as they went to Hermione's room.

In a few minutes all Hermione's things were laid out neatly on the bed. "What is this?" Fred held up a flowered red bra and matching panties. "You wear this?"

"It's a swimsuit." Hermione jerked it out of his hand. "I suppose you've never heard of it."

"Oh, I've heard of them. I swim in the raw myself." Fred said smiling. "You should try it sometime, Hermione."

"Not with you she isn't." Ron stepped between the two and glared at Fred.

"Oh Ron I doubt if he'd have the nerve anyway." Hermione snorted.

"That sounds like a challenge to me." George said.

"Can we get on with this?" Harry asked trying to help Hermione out of the hole Fred and George were so obviously digging for her.

"Right you are Harry. Sorry mate. Let see. Book, book, and of course a couple of...books." Fred flipped through the pages of one.

"Don't forget this. I think it is a book." George held out another.

"You two are just hilarious." Hermione grabbed the book out of Fred's hands. "Can't you be serious for a moment?"

"We tried it a couple times." Fred nodded.

"Didn't like it a bit." George said with distaste. "Too depressing being serious." He paused as he picked up Hermione's jewelry box. He frowned.

"What?" Hermione went to grab it but he held it away from her. "My grandmother gave that to me. I don't take it to Hogwarts with me. Dumbledore must have thought so when he packed it."

"Nothing about the box itself but see here." Fred pointed to three tiny parallel lines on the top. "The plot thickens." He said as the others examined the box in turn.

"I think I would have seen that before." Hermione tried to remember. "I'm sure those scratches weren't on there before we left for Hogwarts."

"But what does it mean?" Ron asked looking over the other items. "What could have made it?"

"Dunno." Harry shrugged but was thinking so hard he stepped back when Crookshanks jumped up on the bed in front of him. "You're as bad as spy cat." He scratched the ginger cat behind the ears. A loud purr filled the room.

"Hermione?" Harry was staring at the cat. "Did Crookshanks act strange or do anything odd at your place?" He turned to watch Hermione consider the question.

"I guess I would say yes." Hermione finally said. "A couple of times I heard him growling at something, once in a closet and once behind a wardrobe but never find out what it was." She sighed and added. "But we weren't there that long."

"So what does that mean?" Ron asked again.

"I don't know. Maybe nothing." Harry sighed. He rubbed his forehead and glanced at the bright sun outside. "Let's see if your folks will let us look through their stuff Hermione."

So the group tramped off to the Grangers' bedroom. Mr. Granger answered the knock. Hermione quickly explained their visit and he responded by opening the door wide. "Come in. I always fancied playing the detective." He opened the wardrobe and placed the suitcases on the bed for them to check out.

For the next half hour they inspect, scrutinized and prodded every thing in sight. Mr. Granger watched thoughtfully.

"Anybody find anything?" George asked as he searched inside the pockets of Mr. Granger's suit. 'Nope.' was echoed around the room.

"Not even any scratches this time." Harry folded a shirt and placed it back where he had found it. "Thanks for letting us look Mr. Granger."

"No problem. Given the circumstances I didn't know if I wanted you to find something or not." Mr. Granger said, laying an arm across Hermione's shoulder. "I guess it's better to know about a spy than not." After putting all the Granger's items back, the group with Mr. Granger went to the kitchen for lunch.

Again Harry was surprised to see Dumbledore, who was standing by the stove tasting something Mrs. Granger was making.

"Very Good." Dumbledore licked his lips and thought. "A bit more salt and a dash more oregano perhaps."

"You know my secret ingredient." Mrs. Granger beamed. She seemed pleased rather than annoyed.

"I am quite fond of Italian cuisine." Dumbledore eyes twinkled at the woman. "Have you ever tried adding shallots?"

"I did but found the flavor too overpowering." Mrs. Granger said.

"Try using sweet butter. It will compliment the recipe and reduce the shallots power without canceling their flavor entirely." Dumbledore told her.

"I'll try that sometime." Mrs. Granger assured him.

Harry watched the headmaster for a moment, wondering why he was still here. Automatically Harry went to the dresser to get plates. Ron and Hermione took out silverware and set the table. When everyone was seated, Fred and George told Dumbledore about the strange scratches. Dumbledore didn't say anything but sat considering the findings.

"I'm not sure what it all means but I think we should be on the alert to odd things happening here." He finally said.

"Like nothing odd ever happens here." George snorted.

Dumbledore eyed the twin. "Odd things not induced by Weasley Wizarding Wheezes." He clarified.

"We promise." Fred held up a hand. "Until this mystery is over." He sighed. "Boy this is a retch. We'll abstain from using any products or magic for entertaining purposes."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Quite a sacrifice and it is appreciated." The old wizard looked questioningly at Harry who had been gazing at him again.

"Why are you here?" Harry finally asked. Remembering last year he barely saw the man and now it seemed the headmaster was here all the time.

"As was said, life is hope. I have a feeling if by some miracle we find where Severus and Remus are there will be little time to waste in summoning me to help." Dumbledore explained.

"Oh," Harry felt relieved that the headmaster still had some hope left. "Thanks."

"Severus and Remus are my friends too Harry." Dumbledore seemed surprised by Harry's gratitude.

"I know, but..." Harry found it hard to explain why he felt grateful. "I'm just glad you're staying around." He admitted and met the headmaster's gaze. An understanding passed between them and Dumbledore appeared touched by Harry's need of him. But the old wizard refrained from commenting for fear of upsetting the truce between them.

After lunch was finished Fred and George departed to their joke shop. Ron, Hermione and Ginny tried to keep Harry occupied, playing games and asking the runespoor questions Harry had to translate the

answers for them. Since the day was both dragging by and disappearing rapidly Harry appreciated the distractions but eventually he told the three worried faces he just need some time alone.

"No problem." Ron clapped him on the shoulder. Hermione didn't seem to know what to say and gave him a hug and kiss on the cheek and followed Ron out of the room.

"Really Ginny, I'm as fine as I'm going to get right now. I just need a little space." Harry said.

Ginny took both his hands and gave them a squeeze. "I understand. But don't forget. You aren't alone, not really."

"With so many Weasleys in the house, it's hard to be alone." Harry grinned. Still holding his hands Ginny stood on her tiptoes and kissed his lips, making Harry wonder if he really wanted to be alone.

"Ahem." Behind Harry, the twins' voice chimed at the door making them jump. Ginny banged her head gently against Harry's chest.

"I would have hoped some people would have had good enough manners to turn around and leave us be." Harry said with the same tone Mr. Weasley had used the night before. He turned to glare at Fred and George but his mouth dropped open and he felt his face turn hot. Standing behind the twins with a face as red as his own was Mr. Weasley.

Harry's brain froze. Ginny looked back and forth from Harry to her father, trying to figure out what was going on. Fred and George were quicker on the up take.

"Sounds like something you would say Dad." George nudged his father.

"Thing is Harry if you are going to snog our sister and want privacy the very least you should do is close the door." Fred said.

Ginny's brown eyes flared. "I was just giving him a kiss goodbye. He wanted to be alone for a bit."

"I think I'll go feed Buckbeak." Mr. Weasley apparently had decided to ignore the whole situation.

"Come on Ginny." George took her arm and pulled her away from Harry. "If you two keep this up, you'll never be alone." He warned giving Harry a wink. But after they had left Harry wasn't so sure George had been teasing.

A cold silence filled the room in the aftermath of Ginny's warm kiss. At first Harry wasn't sure what he wanted to do. So he went to the window and looked out on to the snow cover street and ground. The clouds let little sunlight through the thick grey mass. Would a full moon hidden by clouds still change a werewolf? Harry asked himself. That night on the school grounds the moon had slipped from behind a cloud before Lupin transformed. Harry remembered. Maybe Voldemort would have to wait until next full moon. It would give him more time to find the place Harry hoped. Harry leaned his head against the window pane. His scar didn't hurt but it felt as if it stuck out and the skin around it felt stretched and tight when Voldemort was so pleased with himself.

At last he pushed away from the window and went to his desk. After rummaging around and straightening papers, Harry picked up a stack of photos. The top one showed Remus as a clown. The photo clown waved and tweaked the red bulb on the end of his nose. Harry smiled sadly at the photo and put the stack in a drawer.

With a nervous restlessness growing inside of him Harry wished he could change into his phoenix form. But he was still underage wizard, not allowed to do magic outside of Hogwarts. The need to move didn't go away so Harry left his room and roamed the house. But with so many staying in the place, he kept running into people asking how he was doing. Harry sought refuge in the library, with its walls lined with shelves and musty smelling books.

Sneezing a couple time in a row, Harry scanned the titles looking for something to take his mind off Remus. He had just placed a hand on a book when the door opened.

"Oh, Harry." Hermione paused at the door. "I'll come back later."

"No don't go. It's okay." Harry said.

"Are you sure?" Hermione came in and shut the door.

"Yeah," Harry was going to say more but stopped. He wasn't sure he wanted to be alone anymore.

"I came to look up something for my History of Magic class." Hermione said, eyeing him closely.

"Go ahead. You won't bother me." Harry pulled the book out he had his hand on. "I'm just going to read a bit."

"Thanks." Hermione slowly approached the shelves of books and started hunting. Harry sat down and opened the book in his hand, flipping to the first chapter. For a long time he just stared at the page not taking in one word. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hermione sink into a chair with a large book.

"Hermione?" Harry still looked at the book. "Did you go to church before Hogwarts?"

"Every Sunday." Hermione answered without looking up from her book. "Still do when I'm home."

"Really?" Harry lifted his head and stared at her. "Do you still...believe?"

This made Hermione look up from her book. "Harry?"

"I just wondered?" Harry dropped his gaze to the fireplace. "Before Hogwarts I went with the Dursleys every Sunday too."

"Do you still believe?" Hermione asked. "That's the real question you're asking."

"I suppose." Harry said. "Sometimes it gets confusing."

"Did you ever believe?" Hermione asked trying to look at his face. Harry shrugged.

"I used to pray to God all the time to take me away from the Dursleys." Harry confessed. "For all the good it did."

"My grandmother said people pray to God like he is Father Christmas, you know wanting things." Hermione said. "She told me, a true prayer is one that puts your faith in God and let him guide you to what you need. And even though it seems He doesn't answer He does. Sometimes it's yes. Sometimes it's no and sometimes it's wait. And that's the part most people don't understand. "

"You really still believe?" Harry said more as a statement rather than a question.

"Why would I stop believing just because I'm a witch?" Hermione was puzzled by Harry's sudden interest in religion. "It did bother my mom and dad at first. They thought I wouldn't want to go back to church." She came over to sit beside Harry. "But I told them I feel my magic is a gift from God and I better know what he wants me to do with it. That relieved their minds a lot."

Taking his eyes off the fire Harry looked at Hermione. "You are so sure of yourself. I wish I had your faith. Maybe it would be easier." He said wistfully.

"I doubt it." Hermione snorted. "Having faith doesn't make things easier. I'm not really sure what it does but I am glad to have my faith."

Harry nodded and sighed, glad Hermione wasn't trying to convince him to believe or criticize him for not believing. Almost whispering Harry asked. "Do you think Voldemort is the devil?"

"Oh, I don't know." Hermione considered. "Their methods are similar but personally I think the devil works a little more deviously than Voldemort."

"How so?" Harry asked.

"Both use people but the devil would lure them into destroying themselves rather than doing it himself." Hermione shrugged. "I know it doesn't sound that different."

"For once you can't explain something." Harry smiled sadly. He felt Hermione hook an arm around his.

"Why all this interest in God?" Hermione asked.

"When He didn't answer my prayers when I was little, I started thinking maybe I was in hell already." Harry spoke to his hands on his knees. "That I must have done something terrible and living with the Dursleys was my eternal punishment. And now I've begun thinking maybe because I haven't paid attention to God maybe he's angry with me." Hermione's head pressed on his shoulder. Harry knew he sounded like a little lost kid.

"I don't think you are in hell." Hermione said firmly. "And you haven't done anything for which you're being punished. Trust me."

"You're sure?" Harry laughed a little when Hermione gave him the, 'how dare you ask me that look' he knew so well. "I do trust you, Hermione. But I always thought someone who was so smart wouldn't believe in God that it wouldn't be logical and there wasn't any proof."

"Well, proof is a matter of opinion. As far as intellect goes, magic isn't exactly high on the muggle list of logical and believable things. So if I can believe in magic believing in God is quite easy." Hermione said serenely.

For a long while they sat leaning against each other. "Hermione, when does the full moon rise tomorrow?" Harry asked quietly.

"You know me well don't you." Hermione leaned harder against him. "Nine twenty-two the moon rises tomorrow."

"Maybe it will be cloudy like today and he won't change into a werewolf." Harry glanced at her, hoping for conformation.

"I'm sorry Harry. It's predicted to be very cold clear night. I checked on the weather too." Hermione sighed.

"It's going to be a very cold dark day tomorrow." Harry sighed back.

At dinner, the room was very quiet considering the number of people eating at the table. Harry felt many eyes darting to him but he didn't meet any gazes but stared at his plate toying with the food on it. After forcing a few bites down Harry found his stomach threatening to reject anything else he forced down.

A loud crash from up above caused the portrait in the hall to start screaming. "I'll get it." Harry jumped up and went to silence Mrs. Black. In the entrance hall he heard above scrambling and hissing. Harry took the steps two at a time and followed the sound to a den. Cleo and Crookshanks crouched by a slit in the wall, both tails lashing back and forth in irritation. A stand nearby was upset and an oil lamp lay broken on the floor.

"What are you two doing?" Harry tried to peer into the slit to see what the cats were after. "Maybe that rat Giza was after?" He tried to stroke Crookshanks but the cat hissed at him. "Sorry, I should have known, don't pet a tiger when he's hunting. Well, I'll leave you to it."

Instead of going back to the kitchen Harry went to his room. He laid on his bed trying to decide if he should check on Voldemort. The anticipation he kept feeling wasn't his. His feeling was more like dread. Closing his eyes Harry sent his mind out to Voldemort.

The corridor was the same up until the last door in the long hall. Instead of the solid stone wall, a large window with round metal bars let Harry see the pale form of Snape, still hanging from the ceiling and on the other side a shivering Remus lay huddled against the wall. As unobtrusive as he could, Harry pressed farther into Voldemort's mind. The dark wizard seemed not to have sensed his presence or perhaps hadn't acknowledged it yet. But when Harry came to a barrier he knew Voldemort was aware of him. Disappointed Harry began to withdraw.

"Like the viewing window for the grand event?" Voldemort smirked. "There are a few followers who wanted to witness the humiliation of Snape and the death of his pet." Without answering Harry pulled away and the next moment lay rubbing his scar on his bed.

Sometime in the night Harry finally fell asleep. He was flying, soaring with his scarlet wings. A feeling of release, of freedom washed over Harry and a welcomed calmness entered him as he flew toward the morning light.

Nothing could distract Harry from the gloom that had settled over him after he had awoken on Tuesday morning. Those who knew him kept their concerns to themselves. Those few uninformed order members who inquired about how he was doing got a look from Harry that left them in no doubt of how he was and what he thought of their stupid question. The day crept by with Harry listening to the clock tick each second away. A couple of times, Crookshanks and Cleo were seen racing through the house obviously hunting for something. But that slight distracting lasted only minutes.

By evening, Mrs. Weasley had given up trying to get Harry to eat something, although he sat with them in the kitchen as the rest ate their dinner with less than normal appetites. As the clock ticked closer to nine Harry felt his scar start tingling. He didn't want to go see it happen. With every bit of mental strength he had Harry fought the urge to 'go see'.

Harry was glad only Hermione, her parents, The Weasleys, Tonks and Dumbledore were there waiting with him. Though he had seen more order member this day than he had seen before, Harry assumed Dumbledore had them standing by just in case. Harry closed his eyes. Just in case they found out where Remus is. Just in case I found out where Remus is Harry corrected his thoughts glumly.

Another loud crash, this time in the drawing room set the portrait off again. Fred and George hurried off to check on it and silence the

painting. Then Fred came and stuck his head through the doorway. "Hey Harry, your runespoor's got something in the drawing room. You might want to come."

Harry took off after Fred and all but Mrs. Weasley followed them. In the drawing room the runespoor was writhing and hissing angrily at something hidden in its orange coils. A ginger tail ran by Harry and leaped to the mantle and hissed at the serpent. Cleo climbed onto a shelf and added her angry growls to the noise.

"It's probably that rat she's been smelling." Harry said walking into the room leaving the others watching warily from the doorway. He caught a glimpse of a bald tail and nodded. "Yeah it's a rat. I see its tail." Harry nodded and turned to leave. He had seen the runespoor eat enough rats to have lost any fascination with the process. But as he turned, Harry caught sight of Crookshanks flashing eyes. Then a cold chill went up Harry's spine.

"Hapa? Let me see that rat." Harry walked closer to the runespoor and prodded the looped coils. Someone at the doorway gasped at Harry's boldness.

"Hiissss. It struggles and pinches too hard master. Once I have crushed it, I will show you." Hapa flicked her tongue out and swelled in irritation.

"Let me see it now." Harry said firmly. Giza hissed and spat in anger. Keshe opened her mouth in frustration baring her fangs. "Let me see it." He insisted. Slowly the orange coils loosened and a grey partially balding rat slipped out of the loops and panted for breath.

"Scabbers!" Ron yelled.

"Peter Pettigrew! Show yourself." Dumbledore commanded his blue eyes blazing. The next instant a man lay wheezing on the floor.

The way his watery eyes darted around the room looking for an escape route, made Harry remember the moments in the shrieking shack and his anger flared. "Bind him Giza. But don't bite him, yet." Harry ordered the runespoor in English so Pettigrew would hear and

understand. The serpent quickly wound her length around Pettigrew's body, hissing and spitting all the while.

"Harry," Dumbledore cautioned. "We need him."

"Yes, we need him." Harry nodded not looking at the old wizard stepping up beside him. "You will tell us where Remus is Wormtail." Harry said calmly.

"I can't. I don't know." The man whimpered.

"Liar." Harry shouted at him. "I know you are Voldemort's secret keeper. You know where he is."

Dumbledore put a hand on Harry's arm. "How did you get here? Nobody could have told you. I assume you came in Ron's trunk?"

"Yes," Pettigrew said. "I knew his trunk. I got in at the station before it was taken to the muggle home."

"You thought he would be coming here instead." Dumbledore said. "Even if you did get in you couldn't tell anyone where we were. Why even try?"

"The Dark Lord wanted the werewolf. I was to watch and send word when he would go out alone or with few people so they could capture him."

"The werewolf?" Harry snarled. "Remus Lupin used to be your friend! Where is he?"

"I can't tell you." The man struggled then gasped as the loops tightened around him when Harry hissed at the runespoor.

The anger in Harry rose to the boiling point. Breathing hard he stuck his face into Pettigrew's and stared into the watery eyes. In a low growl he said. "If you don't tell me right now, where they are, I swear, I'll let Giza bite you. And from what I've read, the runespoor poison is a slow and very painful death."

"Harry. No." Dumbledore grabbed his arm tried to pull Harry away from the whimpering man. "You can't do that to him." When Harry turned to Dumbledore there was such rage on his face the old wizard stepped back, startled.

"I'll do it so help me I'll do it. If he doesn't come clean...if anyone deserves it he does." Harry roared. His eyes blazed as he turned back to Pettigrew. "It's up to you Wormtail."

The man whined and cried. "No I can't. You don't understand."

"Giza? Feel like biting someone?" Harry said in English then in parseltongue. Giza hissed and opened her mouth to show her fangs dripping with an orange poison. "I take that as a yes. This is your last chance. Where are they?" Harry almost hissed at him.

"I can't." Pettigrew dissolved into sobs.

"Bite him Giza." Ordered Harry with his hate and loathing for this traitor making him almost glad the man had said no. That he could dispose of him in such a horrible way. He ignored the screams around him, pleading for him to stop. Then a soft hand on his arm made Harry look down.

"Please Harry, don't." Ginny's eyes were filled with tears. She threaded her fingers between his. "I know he deserves it, but don't, please." Harry closed his eyes and gave a hiss to stop Giza. He felt Ginny's hand squeeze his arm and she whispered. "Thanks."

The clock struck the quarter-hour past nine; Harry took a deep breath and stepped back to Pettigrew, pulling away from Ginny. Again he looked into the pale eyes, staring until the man was almost writhing in the runespoors coils. Harry studied the face, the pathetic face of his father's friend. How could a friendship go so wrong? Harry wondered if young Peter had been taunted like Snape. Perhaps not as much or with as much malice but Harry suspected he was the brunt of many unkind jokes.

Swallowing Harry blinked hard, all the anger seemed to have drained away from him. "Let him go Hapa." He hissed softly. Spitting in anger the runespoor dropped her coils and curled around Harry's feet.

When the frightened man stood on his own legs, Harry again stepped up to him. "Peter, please look at me." Harry whispered. The watery eyes flinched as they met Harry's. "If you were ever a friend of my father or to Remus and Sirius, please, for their friendship sake, tell me, where is Remus?" Peter started crying again but this time Harry knew it wasn't in fear but for his lost friendships.

The man gave a jerk of nod. "It's an old Malfoy mansion. It's heavily guarded you won't be able to get in."

"Is it in a forest?" Harry suddenly asked.

"Yes, in the black forest." Pettigrew nodded.

"I know where they are." Harry shouted in triumph, turning to Dumbledore. "I had a dream about the place, long ago."

"But there isn't time to launch a rescue before the moon rises." Dumbledore pointed at the window at the glow rising. "And Harry, you can't go, you are an underage wizard."

"I'm going." Harry's eyes flared and with a deep breath he turned into the phoenix. An awed whisper rippled around the room from the watchers as he soared into the air.

"Harry, wait." Dumbledore cried. "Take me with you." The old wizard held up his hand. Harry swooped low allowing his long golden tail feathers to fall into his palm. Dumbledore clutched the feathers and disappeared in a flash of fire.

A dark mansion nestled in a shabby dark forest appeared below them. Harry concentrated on the dungeon he had seen and with another burst of fire the cold dark room materialized around him.

Shouts from Voldemort and the death eaters watching rang and echoed around him. Dumbledore sent a shield charm to block the

spells they shot at them then he pointed his wand at Snape's chains and sparks flew as they broke apart. He caught the man around his chest with one arm as he fell. Remus stood ridged, shaking and snarling, his change to a werewolf nearly complete.

Harry dodged a killing curse and dove lower for Remus. The chains split apart and Dumbledore flung the bottom of his thick robes at the transformed werewolf. The creature snapped closing his jaws on the material. "Go Harry!" Dumbledore cried."

A burst of flame and they were descending rapidly over the Forbidden Forest. As Harry dipped below the tree branches Dumbledore used his wand to sever the material and set the werewolf loose in the woods. The beast tumbled onto the snow and got up snarling, leaping into the air trying to bite the men dangling. But the next instance in a ball of fire Harry transferred to the hospital wing in Hogwarts castle.

Dumbledore couldn't hold the weight of Snape after he had let go of the phoenix tail and he let him slide to the floor. Harry changed back to human and ran to help. "Let's get him in a bed, he's freezing." Dumbledore and Harry heaved Snape onto a bed. "I'll get Poppy." The old wizard said and hurried toward her office.

Harry pulled a blanket over Snape and grabbed another from the next bed and tucked it in around the shivering man. Their eyes met. Snape's cold black eyes blinked a silent what Harry could only construed as a thanks and then Snape closed his eyes and gave a deep sigh of relief.

Author's notes: Thanks for the wonderful reviews!! Extremely appreciated.

The rat clue was supposed to be in the last chapter. I had a brain freeze and forgot to put it in. OH well. A people couple guessed the phoenix was going to save them. Kudos for the figuring that out, I thought I was being pretty sneaky.

Don't ask me what Mrs. Granger was cooking I have no idea. I don't really know what I was talking about there or in the religious talk with Harry and Hermione. Believe it or not some things just happen. Even when writing something that you think you have control over.

If you would like to, when you review, could you put the country you are in? I just think it is so marvelous that people from all over the world are reading my little story. You might have guessed I'm from the USA. I try to keep my Americanisms out of the story but they tend to slip in now and again.

Chapter 35

The full moon shone brightly through the windows of the ward. Harry gazed at the white surface briefly then glanced down at Snape again. Even though the potion master's eyes were closed the sallow face reflected the pain inside the man. Almost as an echo Harry's scar burned but he tried to his best to hide the pain as Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey hurried over.

"Please, Headmaster, if you could help me get this down him?" Madam Pomfrey held up a bottle of liquid. Harry thought it looked similar to a warming draft.

"Certainly Poppy." Dumbledore gently lifted Snape's shaking head so he could drink but when the man opened his mouth in a weak protest Madam Pomfrey gasped and Dumbledore cursed Voldemort under his breath. The inside of Snape's mouth appeared burned and only by greatest of efforts could Snape swallow.

"I think he should go to St. Mungo's. This will make his recovery much harder." Madam Pomfrey almost whispered staring at the useless potion in her hand.

"No. He would not be safe at St. Mungo's." Dumbledore said easing Snape's head back on the pillow. He stroked a hand on the man's forehead and gazed at Snape with concern.

"Very well." The nurse sighed and her brow furrowed. "I'll see what I can do." She took out her wand and Snape grimaced in pain when she forced his mouth open. For a several minutes Snape endured her treatment but Harry saw his hands digging into the bed clothes in response. When he could stand it no more Snape struggled to pull away from her. Madam Pomfrey let go of him. "I don't think I did much good."

Harry watched Snape's chest heave and a tear of pain leaked out of his eye. Somewhere inside of him, Harry felt a strange feeling of sympathy for Snape. Taking a deep breath Harry changed to the phoenix and landed clumsily on the bed beside Snape's head.

Madam Pomfrey gasped. Harry sang a couple of pure notes to reassure her then he stretched out his long neck over Snape's mouth. In obvious pain Snape parted his lips as wide as he could. Not sure how he was supposed to make his phoenix tears fall, Harry concentrated on sad memories. When that didn't work Harry focused on the sympathy he felt for Snape's pain. He was rewarded by a trickle of pearly white tears running down his beak. He tilted his head so the drops would fall between Snape's parted lips.

The instinct of the phoenix told him enough and Harry fluttered up and changed back. Harry blinked with relief himself. Turning into the phoenix had relieved his own pain. Snape had closed his eyes and Harry could see him rolling his tongue around, spreading the healing tears thoroughly.

Madam Pomfrey couldn't stand it. "Let me see. Open." She ordered. Obediently Snape swallowed then showed her the inside of his mouth. With the glistening white tears still coating some of the tissue his mouth looked healthy and pink. "Wonderful. Thank you Harry." Madam Pomfrey then insisted Snape take the draft in her hand. As he drank the potion, she shooed Dumbledore and Harry away.

"Go. He'll need to sleep." Both knew better than to argue with the nurse so Dumbledore and Harry retreated to the hall.

"That was quite a gesture Harry." Dumbledore gazed intently at his face. "Fawkes has never offered to heal Severus, even at my request."

Harry shrugged. "He's been through enough." He was going to say more but stopped himself. Harry really didn't know why he had felt the need to help Snape. A flash of red on Dumbledore's robe caused Harry to look down at the headmaster's torn robes. Harry gasped and went pale. "Did Remus bite you?" He dropped to one knee to examine a long bloody scratch on the old wizard's thin pale shin.

"No Harry it's not from Remus." Dumbledore pulled Harry to his feet. "When you dove in to the forest a branch scraped my leg." He assured him.

For a long moment Harry gazed at him then nodded. His thoughts turned to the werewolf. "I'm going to find Remus. He'll need someone to bring him back here when the moon sets." Harry told Dumbledore rather than ask his permission.

The old wizard shook his head. "It will be many hours before he changes back." Dumbledore held a hand when Harry started to protest. "Have you forgotten there are people waiting to hear if we were successful?"

"Yes, I did forget." Harry felt abashed. "I'll go back right now."

"Wait. How do you feel? I know your animagus form seems very natural but the process is still very new to you." Dumbledore eyed him even closer. "Are you at all fatigued?"

The question obviously surprised Harry. "No not a bit." He shook his head meeting the headmaster's eyes.

"Very well, you may go to headquarters. However Harry I do not want you returning to Hogwarts. I will see Remus gets back here safely and back to Grimmauld Place." Dumbledore said gently but firmly. "Believe me Harry. Remus would not want you to see him just after he changes back. Not yet at least." When it looked like Harry was going to argue Dumbledore added. "Give him that much dignity." Harry nodded reluctantly then he clapped his hand on his scar.

"I think Voldemort is hacked off about something." Harry grinned through the pain and saw the amused look in the headmaster's face. In the next breath Harry took his phoenix form and flapped along the hall before a flash of fire brought him to the stone kitchen of number twelve Grimmauld Place.

"Oh my." Mrs. Weasley cried when Harry landed on the table and returned to his human shape. She grabbed him in a hug. "Harry thank heaven you're safe."

“Remus and Snape are safe too.” Harry said. “Professor Dumbledore thought I should come back and tell everyone.” He headed for the door.

“They took his body to a spare room.” Mrs. Weasley said grimly.

Harry whirled around. “Whose body?”

“That traitor, Pettigrew.” Mrs. Weasley’s eyes blazed. “Tonks killed him.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m sorry.” Harry said. He put a hand on his forehead and suddenly he felt very tired.

“Sit down Harry.” Mrs. Weasley pushed him into a chair. “I’ll get them.” She hurried out of the kitchen and when she reappeared, Hermione, her parents, all of the Weasley and Tonks followed her into the kitchen.

Hermione and Ginny engulfed Harry in a tug of war hug. Many hands patted his back and Harry met Tonks eyes and nodded. He watched her eyes closed and she let out breath it seemed she had been holding it since Remus had been captured.

“Well tell us what happened.” Fred poked Harry in the back as he took a seat beside him. Chairs scraped the floor as everyone sat down to listen.

Knowing he couldn’t deny them Harry took a deep breath and began.

“My first transfer was above the manor. Like what I saw in my dream. Then I took us to the cell Remus and Snape were in.” Harry gave a shake of his head. “It’s a good thing I took Dumbledore. I don’t know how I would have broken those chains as a phoenix. Once he released him, Dumbledore caught Snape with his wand arm.”

Harry’s eyes glazed a bit as he tried to remember the details of so few of seconds. “I don’t know how he managed to break the manacle on Remus holding Snape in one arm and my tail feathers in the other but he did.” Harry shuddered. “Remus had fully transformed by that

time. I just dove low leaving it up to Dumbledore to figure out some way of getting a hold of him without getting bitten." There was a gasp around the room.

"The headmaster flung his robes at the Remus and he clamped his jaws on the material and Dumbledore told me to go. I didn't want to bring a werewolf back here or inside Hogwarts. The only place I could think of was the Forbidden Forest."

"Why not the shrieking shack?" Ron asked.

"Not enough room. Dumbledore and Snape would have surely been bitten, the ceilings aren't high enough for me to have kept them out of his reach." Harry shook his head. "Once over the forest I went in low and Dumbledore cut his robes and Remus fell onto the snow and started leaping at the Dumbledore and Snape. But the next instant I took us all to the hospital wing in Hogwarts." Harry sighed.

"Is Severus going to be alright?" Mr. Weasley asked taking off his glasses and wiping them. His face looked strained and tired.

"I think so." Harry nodded not telling them about his part in the healing of Snape. "Madam Pomfrey gave him a potion and made us leave him to sleep." Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his scar. He wanted to hear what happened here before he was overcome by the pain of Voldemort's anger. "So what happen with Pettigrew?" He looked at Tonks whose eyes blazed with a fury and hate Harry had never seen in her. But her jaw was set and she said nothing.

"After you left Mom had heard the noise and came to see what was going on." Fred took up the events.

"Once she came into the drawing room the runespoor left." George said. "Mom said you had told it not to be in the same room with her." Harry nodded.

"Pettigrew stood there eyeing all of us. We had drawn our wands so he knew better than try to escape, or so we thought." Fred said harshly.

“Dad started questioning him about how he really got in here without us making the connection of scratches and that rat hair.” George looked at his father to see if he wanted to take it from there. But his father’s face was a set as Tonks’ so George continued. “Of course he thought he would come here straight away when he climbed into Ron’s trunk on the train. He had gotten on the train at Hogsmeade Station.”

“He was in a bit of a pickle when he ended up at Hermione’s place.” Fred said. “It seems he had with him a befuddlement solution with him. He was to use it on the inhabitants here so he could learn where this place is and leave when you-know-who summoned him.”

“Actually the rat had two with him.” George corrected. “When the Grangers took Hermione and Ron into London shopping Pettigrew resumed his human shape to send an owl and one of the vials dropped into the trunk without him knowing it. It wouldn’t have mattered but the befuddlement solution isn’t something that should travel by floo powder.”

“The solution opened in Ron’s trunk and coated everything. So by just touching them we were affected by it.” Fred continued. “And it confused the rat too. That’s why it took him a while before he was with it enough to send an owl to tell the death eaters Remus had left the house.”

“But wouldn’t you have to drink the stuff for it to have an affect?” Harry glanced at Hermione and she shook her head. “And where did he get the owls to send? I don’t think Pig would have helped him.”

“This was the strongest befuddlement solution it is possible to make. It would have even affected Dumbledore. That’s what Voldemort was hoping.” She said. “Just opening the vial would cause a person to be confused from the odorless fumes. And it dries almost instantly so when it got over Ron’s things he wouldn’t notice they were wet or anything.” Hermione told him and added. “Pettigrew had several little owls in the pockets of his coat. When he changed into the rat they changed with him.”

"The rat had the audacity to admit Snape had made the potion for Voldemort." George gritted his teeth.

"That's when I lost it." Tonks broke her silence. "The way he snorted about Snape making the potion." Her chest heaved and her eyes blazed. "He put his hand in his pocket to bring out the other vial but I thought he was reaching for his wand." A tear rolled down her face. "The only thing I'm sorry for is he didn't suffer more. It was too easy for him to die."

"It wasn't a decision you should have made." Mr. Weasley said quietly. "There are laws and trials to make those judgments."

"How can you say that?" Tonks flared. "After all he did? You feel he even deserved a trial?"

Harry's scar blazed and he felt like he was listening to Tonks and Mr. Weasley argue from the end of a long tunnel. The last thing he heard was Mr. Weasley telling Tonks she shouldn't have killed Pettigrew in front of his children. Curling inward, Harry blanked out to everything but the pain in his scar and the anger raging in Voldemort. The agony grew and the only thing Harry could see were flashes of death eaters writhing in pain as Voldemort cursed them in his anger.

There was no sense of time passing. Harry felt the excruciating pain would go on forever. So time didn't matter all that much. Then with a soft cool touch the pain vanished. The world around him was fuzzy but Harry knew by the red hair and freckled nose Ginny was beside him with her hand on his forehead.

"Are you alright Harry?" Mrs. Weasley asked seated next to the bed on the opposite side of Ginny.

Harry nodded and closed his eyes. He was so tired. Idly he wondered if transforming into the phoenix had tired him more than he had realized. Letting himself float along Harry drifted off into a soothing sleep.

A movement beside him woke Harry the next morning. Still with her hand on his forehead, Ginny lay sleeping next to him. Then he noticed she was on top of his cover and had a blanket of her own. For a few moments Harry watched her sleep, taking in the details of her face, the strands of red hair hanging across her cheek, the sprinkles of freckles on her nose and the fullness of her lips.

Harry touched the hand on his forehead and Ginny opened her eyes. Gently he removed her hand and kissed it. "Thanks."

"Happy Christmas." Ginny yawned and stretched.

"Oh, yeah. It is Christmas isn't it?" Harry had truly forgotten. "How did you get your folks to let you sleep beside me?"

"Well," Ginny broke into a grin. "We're not under the same covers and." Ginny lifted her head to look around the room. "If you haven't noticed, we're not exactly alone."

Harry sat up and gave a snort. Every bit of floor space was taken up by beds with Fred, George, Ron and Hermione in one. Charlie sat in a chair beside Harry's bed, dozing with his wand held loosely in his hand. There were piles of presents at each person's feet. Reaching for his own small pile of packages Harry dug through them.

"What?" Ginny started but Harry put a finger to his lips. He found what he had been searching for and grinning held up a large Weasley Wizarding Wheezes firecracker. Ginny's eyes grew bright with delight. "How?" She whispered. They both knew it took a wand to set it off.

Glancing at the sleeping man on the chair, Harry leaned over and gently prodded the firecracker against the tip of Charlie's wand. It started to fizzle; taking aim Harry lobbed it between the bedsteads and quickly ducked back down pulling the covers up. Ginny dove under her blanket and they lay grinning at each other.

BANG!

Charlie sprang to his feet confused, pointing his wand looking for a target. Fred landed with a dull thud on the floor before scrambling to his feet then cursed as he stubbed his toe. George fought with the bedclothes and only managed to make it to his knees. Hermione was sitting up, her bushy hair even bushier from sleep, eyeing Harry and Ginny who had half sat up to watch the reactions. Still asleep Ron's leg twitched and slid from beneath his blanket. Ginny nudge Harry and pointed at Ron, "See, I told you."

"Harry!" Fred had followed Hermione's gaze. "That's a fine way to pay us for babysitting you through the long cold night."

"You didn't have to stay." Harry eyed him back. "Ginny is the only one that can stop the pain."

"Oh, I don't know." George had won his fight with the covers and started stepping from one bed to the other landing on Harry's. Fred followed.

"Yeah, maybe empathy runs in the family." Fred bowled Harry over pushing his head into the pillow with two hands on his forehead. "Let's see if this helps."

"Get off." Harry laughed struggling against the twins combined hold.

"Stop it." Ginny eyes flashed and she pulled at George's arm. "Just be case he isn't crying in pain doesn't mean his scar doesn't hurt." She gave George a pinch to make him let go. Instantly the twins released Harry looking contrite.

"Sorry Harry." George pulled him up concerned. "We wouldn't do anything t hurt you mate." Fred's face had gone unusually sober.

"I'm fine." Harry glanced at Ginny whose brown eyes were still flashing. "How did you know it still hurt?"

"I saw you flinch when you took my hand away. Ginny said.

"What's all the noise?" Ron's tousled head appeared and he rubbed his eyes as he sat up. Everyone in the room laughed. But Ron didn't

pay attention to it. He spotted the presents at the foot of his bed and dove into unwrapping them. Still laughing Fred and George went back to their stack of packages. And they all started tearing off paper.

Before they got very far on the gifts, the door opened. "What is going on in here?" Mrs. Weasley asked sternly. "I told you all to be quiet this morning and let Remus sleep."

Harry felt his stomach drop and he leapt out of bed. "How is he?" Mrs. Weasley stopped Harry from going off to find Lupin.

"He's fine Harry, or he will be with a bit of rest." Mrs. Weasley assured him pushing Harry back toward his presents. "He just needs a good lie in."

"Too late for that." Remus leaned against the door way behind Mrs. Weasley. His skin was grey and he looked much older than the few days that had passed since Harry last had seen him.

"Remus." Harry grabbed his arm to make sure he was real.

Lupin smiled gently and pulled Harry into a brief hug. "I'm okay, Harry. Thanks to you."

"And Dumbledore." Harry added. He still had a bone to pick with the headmaster but he would give credit where credit was due. Lupin nodded.

"Remus," Mrs. Weasley took his arm. "Please, go back and rest while I get breakfast."

"I thought I'd watch the unwrapping since I'm awake. If nobody minds?" Remus said.

"Come in!" Fred pushed by his mother and pulled Lupin into the room. "You can rest in my bed." Several pillows were tossed over and Hermione arranged them so Remus could watch and rest sitting up. Grinning Mrs. Weasley seemed to approve of his VIP treatment, she nodded and left.

Returning to his own bed, Harry slowly unwrapped Mrs. Weasley's yearly Christmas jumper while watching Ginny out of the corner of his eye taking the paper off the gift he had given her. She opened a deep blue velvet box and gave said "Oh. Harry! It's beautiful." Ginny's eyes were misty as she took out a golden locket. "And it has a phoenix on it. Oh, thank you."

"Look inside." Harry grinned.

Ginny pried open the locket. "Oh, how wonderful!" Her cheeks flushed as she showed Hermione who had leaned over to see the pictures inside the locket. "When did you take a picture of Cleo?"

"Are you kidding?" Harry snorted. "Anytime I picked up the camera when she was around she acted insulted if I didn't take her picture."

Ginny giggled. "I love this picture of the two of us at the dance." She smiled at him.

"It's my favorite too." Harry grinned back.

"Thank you so much." Ginny leaned over to kiss Harry but a hand appeared between them and she ended up kissing George's hand instead. Ginny's eyes flared again but George shook his finger at her.

"No kissing in bed until you're thirty five."

"And certainly not in front of us." Fred added still unwrapping gifts.

Ginny just glared at them then she turned to Harry. "Unwrap the one I got you. I hope you like it."

Quickly Harry found a brightly wrapped rather heavy rectangular package. Harry couldn't imagine not liking anything Ginny had picked out for him. When he pulled the paper off his jaw dropped. "Ginny! Where did you get this?" Harry ran a hand over the title of a large leather bound book, entitled; A Tree Grows in Every Pot. A Potter Family History by J. K. Potter." Harry glanced up at her. "This is great!"

“Do you really like it? I had everyone looking, Remus, Charlie, Bill, Percy, Fred, George, Dad and Mom, Even Dumbledore said he would look through his books.” Ginny said.

“So where did they find it?” Harry flipped open the book and glanced over some names.

“Dad found it in a muggle second hand shop.” Ginny told him. “Remus confirmed it was actually a genealogy of your Potter line.”

“Thank you. This means a lot to me.” Harry gave the barest of hints of leaning toward Ginny to kiss her and George’s hand rose between them. Annoyed Harry mustered the sloppiest wet kiss he could and planted it on George’s cheek. “You pass that on to Ginny since you won’t let me give it to her in person.” Harry heard Remus chuckle, glancing over he saw the man grinning broadly.

Wiping the kiss off her face George gave Harry a dirty look. “You know we only promised Dumbledore not to use any of our products until the mystery had been solved and it has.”

“You’ll sing a different tune when you open what I got you.” Harry said not worried in the least. The twins exchanged looks and cautiously pawed through the packages for Harry’s present to them. They came up with a green envelope.

“Well, there’s no accounting for size.” Fred rolled his eyes as he opened the envelope. George leaned in to read the card he pulled out. Both responded with identical low whistles.

“Harry thanks, but really this is too much.” George looked up. Fred sat down on the edge of the bed in shock.

“I’m just adding to my initial investment.” Harry assured them.

“What is it?” Ron reached over and tugged the card from Fred’s hand. He read. “A size fifteen brass self stirring cauldron will be delivered to your place of business at your convenience.”

“So Weasley Wizarding Wheezes can increase production.” Harry explained.

“We were talking about getting a size ten but thought we would wait until we have a bit more cash flow.” George gazed at the back of the card as it was passed around then he looked at Harry. “Thanks, mate.”

“Yeah. Thanks Harry.” Fred nodded.

“You’re welcome.” Harry rarely saw Fred and George at a loss for words.

They just finished opening the rest of their gifts when a knock came at the door and Tonks came in. “Remus, you shouldn’t be out of bed.”

“I’m not really he patted the bed he was propped up in. “Don’t fuss. Molly is the designated fusser.” Tonks laughed and hugged Lupin around the neck and kissed him soundly, while the girls said ‘ahhh’ and the boys gave a wolf whistle.

With a pink tinge to his cheek, Remus smiled as Tonks sat beside him on the bed. “Molly and Martha said breakfast is almost ready. She gave Remus a wink. “And Harry’s present.”

“Arthur and Robert got it working?” Remus said enthusiastically. “Excellent.”

“My present?” Harry asked, knowing it had to do with what ever was in the drawing room.

“Breakfast first. I’m starving.” Tonks stood up and Remus took her offered hand and got out of bed. “Get dressed everyone.” He waved his arm as Tonks led him out of the room. There was a general scramble as Harry’s night guard scrambled over the extra beds in the room to the door.

“Come on Ginny.” Charlie said firmly to her. Reluctantly Ginny waved to Harry and left with her brothers.

Author's notes: Thanks to all who review!

The last chapter...it was obvious it was the rat wasn't it? I kept trying to make myself believe it wasn't THAT obvious. I should have listened. You see, I had contact with a befuddlement solution...yeah, that's it. I was befuddled, a very powerful potion, I'm surprised all of you weren't befuddled too. Okay, it's a lame way to cover up but at least it wasn't all just a dream. -----American reference to an old TV show that killed someone off then to bring them back made everything that happen since he died a dream he'd had.

Chapter 36

Breakfast was a loud and cheerful affair, with everyone in good spirits. Halfway through his second stack of pancakes Harry remembered to ask Remus. "How's Snape?"

"He'll be okay." Remus said thoughtfully. "It's going to be a lot different for him."

"How so?" Harry thought he knew but waited for Remus to confirm it.

"It won't be safe for Severus to leave Hogwarts, except perhaps to come here by floo powder or port key." Lupin said.

Harry nodded. "I wondered about that."

Lupin gazed at Harry. "I think you finally impressed him, Harry. Severus did not think he would ever leave that cell."

"I didn't do it to impress him or anyone. I just wanted you back." Harry said a little irritated by all the stares. "Okay, I didn't want Snape left with Voldemort either." He added.

"Well, in any case, he is grateful to be out of Voldemort's reach." Remus said. "And so am I." He grinned.

"Here, here!" Fred lifted a glass of pumpkin juice. Everyone did the same then they all clinked glasses. Harry couldn't help smiling to himself as he drank his pumpkin juice. Three times this year alone he had bested Voldemort's plans. Four if he counted the brief period Voldemort had possessed him and tried to kill Ron. The numbers may not mean much to some but to Harry, he felt stronger and more confident of himself with these small victories. Maybe he would be able to defeat Voldemort in the end, Harry thought as he finished his sausage not really taking in the conversation around him.

His thoughts took him to the books his mother had put in her trunk. What did he need to learn from them? He hadn't so much as read a page since opening the chest. Nor had he questioned Hermione about the Slytherin book. And then there was the Runespoor shield,

when and where would he use it? His darker thoughts must have reflected in his expression because Mrs. Weasley put a hand on his back.

"Are you all right Harry, dear?" She gazed intently at him. "Perhaps you would like to sleep a bit more before..." Mrs. Weasley gazed over to her husband then at Lupin.

"I get my gift?" Harry grinned. He had seen all the furtive looks going back and forth. "I'm ready when you are." He pushed back his plate. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Granger rose.

"Let us make one finally test then you can come to the drawing room." Mr. Weasley eyed Lupin significantly.

"Ah, yes. I'll be sure he brings them Arthur." Remus nodded. Tonks face turned stern.

"You are not climbing those stairs again. I'll see he brings whatever you need." Tonks told him. She motioned for Harry to come with her. "We'll need to get something from your room." Was all that she would tell him until they climbed the steps.

"Okay, what do I need to bring?" Harry said as they stepped inside of his bedroom.

"Something that Remus saw in your mum's trunk." Tonks started to say then. "Damn, I don't know what to call them."

"That leaves it pretty open then." Harry hadn't really been worried about Remus telling people what was in his trunk but evidently he had said something.

"I'll know it when I see it. Remus said they were right on top." Tonks still frowned searching for the words.

Everything seemed to click in place for Harry. "Do you mean the video tapes?"

"That's it!" Tonks cried. "Exactly. He said your mom left you a move camera and tapes."

"That's a camcorder." Harry corrected opening his school trunk. "But I thought your dad was a muggle, didn't he show you any of this stuff?"

"No, he was quite content with magical stuff over muggle." Tonks watched as Harry set out three video tapes and the camera. "Is that all of them?" Harry nodded. "Let's head back to the drawing room. Everything should be ready."

When Harry and Tonks arrived outside the closed doors to the drawing room, he heard a lot of noise coming from within. He looked curiously at Tonks who grinned and knocked.

"We're ready. Come in!" Mr. Weasley's voice answered. The doors opened and Harry gave a small gasp. In the large room, seats were arranged around a television and a video recorder. The seats were empty with the Weasley, Hermione and Mrs. Granger standing around the wall. Giving him a small push Tonks pointed to a settee up front where Lupin sat.

"You sit up there Harry, beside Remus." Tonks tugged the video tapes and camera from his hands. "We'll need these." She walked to the front and handed them to Mr. Granger.

"Harry, with the combined efforts of Arthur, Robert, Tonks and myself, we have a working ..ah?" He looked to Mr. Granger for the right words.

"Video tape player and television." Mr. Granger supplied.

"Great!" Harry grinned and then his smile disappeared. As he sat down, Harry gave a glance at all the eager faces watching him. The prospect of seeing his parents on tape could have an emotional reaction Harry didn't know if he wanted to share with so many. He swallowed hard. How could he deny anyone the opportunity to watch with him? Putting on a brave face Harry nodded to Remus. "I'm ready."

“Harry, we’ve all discussed this and if you want to watch the tapes alone, we all will understand.” Remus made Harry look at him. “I know we have it set up for everyone to watch but don’t feel pressured if you want to go it alone first.” Harry nodded, grateful they had thought about it. Slowly Harry gazed at the people around him and found the faces comfortingly familiar; each one returned a look of understanding and reassurance. These people aren’t strangers Harry thought and smiled back at them. He turned to Remus.

“I guess the best way to watch my family videos is with my family.” Harry gestured to the people around him. He was immediately smothered in a hug by Mrs. Weasley, Hermione and Ginny. Ron thumped him on the back.

“I think Dad would have cried if you’d said no Harry.” Ron laughed in his ear then sat down behind the settee, patting the chair beside him for Hermione to come sit down next to him. Ginny sat down beside Harry and hooked her arm around his. Tonks squeezed in on the other side of Remus and grinned. When everyone had settled into a chair Remus gave the go ahead to Mr. Granger.

“Since none of the tapes are labeled I guess it doesn’t make much difference which one we play first.” Mr. Granger took the top one and slipped it into the player. “Harry you want to do the honors?” He handed Harry a remote. Taking a deep breath Harry gazed at it a moment then hit play.

For a long moment nothing but static ran across the screen. Harry heard Mrs. Weasley whisper to Mrs. Granger if this was what all the fuss was about. Then she gasped as a large hand appeared in on the television screen.

“Lily! Get that damn thing out of my face!” A scowling James Potter came into frame when the camera holder backed away.

“Oh get a grip James. It isn’t going to hurt you.” Lily Potter’s voice laughed from behind the camera. His mother’s voice made Harry’s heart do a strange flip.

"I know I just don't like it." James continued to look irritated at the camera. "I told you to quit buying all that muggle stuff."

"So you're my boss now?" Lily began to sound irritated. James ran a hand through his hair. "And stop roughing up your hair. It stands up enough as it is. I only hope poor little Harry doesn't have that cowlick of yours."

"What happened to love, honor and obey?" James glared at the camera.

"I do love you." A sweet silky voice made James smile.

"Oh my, Harry you do have his smile." Ginny whispered.

"I suppose that's supposed to placate me?" James said growled in obvious pretence of being angry.

"Oh I suppose I honor you too. And obey on occasion." Lily giggled. "When I think you might be right."

"Oh that's comforting to know." James grinned shaking his head. "So why are you using that thing on me?"

"I want some practice with the video camera before Harry's first birthday." Lily must have used the zoom because the screen now had a very large picture of James's nose.

"I like your nose better." Ginny whispered. Harry suppressed the urge to laugh.

"So do you have to hold the thing all the time?" James asked. Harry had the strange feeling his father was up to something, just from the look in his eyes.

"No, not always. I thought I'd sit it on the sideboard and let it tape Harry's birthday party." Lily shifted the camera. "It is quite heavy after holding it a bit. I think I'll put a charm on it to make it lighter."

“Will it tape both of us together?” James asked and the camera nodded up and down. “Then set it opposite the couch and let it take both of us.” He suggested. The camera jostled and was moved around until Lily was satisfied the aim was right. Then an auburn hair woman hurried around to sit beside her husband on the couch.

James grinned and put an arm around her. “Now what do we do?”

“Some people make tapes of their thoughts for their children to play later in life.” Lily suggested then nudged her husband in the ribs when he rolled his eyes at her idea. “Then what would you tell Harry if he could understand you right now?” She challenged him.

“He already understands every word his old dad says.” James bragged.

“Oh please. Save it for Sirius and Remus.” It was Lily’s turn to roll her eyes.

“I have an idea!” James eyes became bright. And Harry had a feeling his father had been planning whatever it was from the moment his mother had set the camera down.

“What?” Lily turned smiling to her husband. The next moment James had pushed her down on the couch and was kissing her passionately. “James! What are you doing?” She gasped as she came up for breath.

“We could recreate Harry’s moment of conception.” James growled as he nibbled her neck. “For posterity.”

“You can’t put that on a video tape.” Lily struggled against her husband but was laughing too much. James raised his head.

“I’m sure you can. Sirius told me about some...well...tape things where they showed everything.” James shifted so he was on top pinning his wife’s legs with his own.

“Uh, Remus.” Whispered Harry, feeling his face flush. He really didn’t want to see his parents doing anything more than kissing.

"If I remember correctly, I don't think they get very far." Remus whispered back.

As James was kissing his way down his wife's neck a loud roar made the video camera shake. They pair looked over the back of the couch at the door down the hall. The roaring thundered for a moment longer than stopped. The next moment the door swung open and Sirius and Remus entered.

"Not interrupting anything important are we?" Sirius leaned on the couch and grinned.

"Looks like they might have been starting to work on a little brother or sister for Harry." Remus gazed down at the couple.

"Don't you two every knock?" James glared at them as he sat up.

"Never did before. Why start now?" Sirius gave his bark like laugh. Harry felt a pang of loss from that simple sound. He glanced at Remus and saw the man blinking hard.

"Now look what you've done!" Lily sprang up from the couch. "Harry's woke up with the noise of that machine of yours Sirius." She disappeared off the right side of the screen.

"Sorry Lily." Sirius sat down taking Lily's place on the couch. He stared at the camera and frowned. "What's that?" He nudged James.

"Some muggle thing that takes pictures." James shrugged. "Lily bought it."

"You let her?" Sirius gave his friend an eye roll.

"Sure I let her. I don't care about that muggle stuff." James gave another indifferent shrug. "I put up a fuss so she doesn't drag everything home."

"Good psychology." Remus snorted. "Ah there's my boy!" He put out his hands to take Harry from Lily. The mop of black hair was flat

on one side. Sleepy eyes peered out from behind his fringe. Cheeks streaked with drying tears smiled and the baby reached out to Remus.

There were squeals around the room. "Harry you're so cute." Ginny hugged his arm.

"Hey, I'm his godfather. I should get to hold him first." Sirius argued.

"Uncle Remus called dibs." Remus smiled and hugged Harry to him. Suddenly his smile faded and he looked down in dismay. "Uh, Lily....I think he sprung a leak."

There was a howl of laughter around the room. "Harry peed on Remus!" The twins chanted until they were hushed by their mother.

"Just marking his territory Remus." Sirius laughed as Lily handed Remus a towel and took Harry from him.

Harry stared at the image of his father chatting with Sirius and Remus on the television. This was his father. Not the Hogwarts student, not a Marauder, not Prongs, this was his dad. Harry felt a tightening in his throat and a tear rolled down his cheeks. He went to wipe them off but Ginny still claimed his arm. Her hand entwined his and gave him a squeeze.

Tape went to static again. "I guess that's all on that tape." Mr. Granger said after they let it play for a while. Harry was just about to stop the tape when a room appeared then his mother walked into view and sat down in a rocking chair with baby Harry in her arms. A single candle lit the room. Behind the rocking chair, Harry could see a shimmer from a mobile of broomsticks and golden snitches hanging above a crib. Baby Harry was fussy and his mother rocked and cooed to her son. She put a bottle to his lips and his cries ceased.

"She looks so sad." Ginny said softly. As if agreeing a single tear ran down Lily's cheek. The auburn haired woman closed her eyes and swallowed. With obvious effort she put on a smile for the baby in her arms.

When the bottle was gone Lily continued to rock her son. A soft lullaby rose from her as she gazed at her baby. A shiver ran down Harry's spine and without knowing it he mouthed the words to the song along with his mother.

"Lily?" James' voice came from off screen. "Everything alright?"

"Yes, go back to sleep." Lily nodded giving a glance to where her husband's voice originated.

"I love watching you rock him." James came into view and he knelt beside the rocker. "You okay?"

"Why did he have to tell us now?" Lily said softly. "Why couldn't he have waited until after his birthday?"

"Dumbledore must have his reasons." James shrugged. "But don't worry about it. It's probably the Longbottom boy anyway. Frank and Alice have very powerful magical abilities no doubt they'll pass it on to Neville."

Lily remained silent for a long moment. "I know it is Harry." She met her husband's eyes. James' face went ashen and he swallowed, without a word he touched his baby's head. He seemed to have accepted his wife's word as fact with no argument.

"He'll be powerful too Lily." James finally spoke, glancing at Lily for confirmation.

"Yes," Lily finally smiled. "Very powerful."

A strange silence filled the room as the picture on the television faltered and went to static again. The whole room seemed to sigh as one.

"It looked like the battery on the camera went dead." Mr. Granger said quietly. Harry nodded and pressed the stop button on the remote. Mr. Granger ejected the tape and glanced to Harry. "Do you want to see another one?"

Wiping his cheeks Harry nodded. "Go ahead." He said hoarsely. Mr. Granger put a second tape in the player and pressed the play button.

The television screen showed a room decorated for a party. Streamers and a banner with 'Happy Birthday' floated and squirmed in the air. A lavish table with candles and a layout of food had a cake at each end. One with 'Happy 1st Birthday Harry' and the other 'Happy 1st Birthday Neville' written in red and gold icing and both had a single candle in the middle of it.

James came into the picture carrying Harry in his arms. The twins laughed. "Harry's wearing a ducky on his jumper." Fred pointed. A quack came from George before his mother could hush them again. Once again Harry was grateful for the twins' humor. He had just started feeling sorry for himself when they had lightened his mood with just that simple quip. Nobody remembered their first birthday even with their parents still living.

The camera was set down and adjusted to capture the day. Sirius and Remus were the first to arrive. Each carried in a gift for the birthday boys. After placing the packages on a table Sirius turned to James who still held Harry.

"So what's this amazing thing Harry can do now?" Sirius sat down in an overstuffed chair next to the couch. "Has he walked on water yet?"

"Oh he can't walk on water." James shook his head. "But he did swim across the channel yesterday."

Remus sniffed and looked at the bottom of his shabby shoe. "It's getting deep in here."

"I'll say. Just show us how smart Harry is before everyone gets here and he becomes shy boy again." Sirius reached out and tickled Harry in the ribs. The little boy squealed and laughed.

"Don't get him going Sirius. Harry? Look at Daddy." James turned his son's attention back to him. "Harry? What does Padfoot say?" James pointed to Sirius.

Little Harry promptly said. “Arf arf!” Laughs and ahs rippled through the watchers.

“Harry? What does Moony say?” James pointed to Remus.

The little boy kicked his feet and leaned his head back and “Aoooooh.” Little Harry howled. Everyone in the room watching burst out laughing.

Harry felt Hermione’s hands squeeze his shoulders. “You’re just too cute.”

“Harry?” Sirius pointed at James. “What does Prongs say?” The boy looked confused and stared at his dad.

“What does Daddy say Harry?” Lily had just come into the camera’s view. Harry’s eyes brightened and he made the snorting noise of a pig. Sirius and Remus collapsed laughing.

“Who taught him that?” James gazed at his wife, who didn’t meet his eyes.

“No idea.” She took little Harry from him. “Where’s Peter?” Lily asked.

“He said he had something to pick up before he came.” Remus said. “He’ll be here.”

“Probably the last one to come. He always is late.” A knock came at the door. Sirius got up. “I’ll get it. I’ll be the doorman for you.”

“Thanks you Sirius.” Lily smiled. “Oh good it’s the Longbottoms.”

Many unfamiliar faces drifted in and out of the television screen, until a couple holding a baby sat down on the couch. Harry recognized them as Frank and Alice Longbottom and the baby could only be Neville. Lily and Alice put their sons on the floor and immediately the two little boys took turns giving each other any object within their reach.

"You two would do that until someone stopped you." Remus said softly. "I'd forgotten."

"Neville should see this." Harry said in a husky voice. "He's never seen his parents like this."

The house filled with people all wishing the two little boys on the floor 'Happy Birthday'. Suddenly a loud explosive sound shook around the house. Every wizard and witch in the camera's view pulled their wands out in alarm.

"Hang on. It's only Hagrid sneezing." Sirius stepped back to let a the huge man squeeze through the doorway then another small blast shook the house again.

"Hagrid if you have a cold you shouldn't be around the children." Neville's Grandmother's voice admonished from off camera.

"Not a cold." Hagrid sneezed again. Everybody darted out of the way and some droplets flecked the lens of the camera. From the pocket of his moleskin coat Hagrid pulled a small squirming black and white cat. "Here somebody take it."

Lily took the cat from the large hand. "Hagrid why did you bring a cat if they make you sneeze so?"

"I found it wandering around. I couldn't just leave her." Hagrid sniffed and rubbed his nose as if he was going to sneeze again.

"She is pretty." Lily set the cat down by the two boys playing on the floor.

Ginny gasped. "It's Cleo!"

"It can't be." Harry said leaning forward with her to look closer.

"I'm sure of it. Oh she's gone under the chair. Now we'll never know." Ginny sat back.

“Yes we can.” Harry grabbed the remote and before anyone could stop him he hit the rewind button.

“Wait. Don’t!” Mr. Granger cried. “Oh dear.” The picture went askew and then the television and player seemed to lose power.

“What happened?” Harry asked feeling guilty.

“It’s one thing we hadn’t gotten working properly yet, the reverse.” Mr. Weasley said. He hurried to the front to help fix the machine.

“I’m sorry.” Harry said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No, don’t worry, we’ll get it fixed.” Mr. Weasley assured him. “It may take a day or two. Making a magical substitute for electticklty is a bit tricky.”

“And Remus needs to rest.” Tonks kept Lupin from jumping up and helping.

“So that’s it for today?” Fred asked then added. “Good show.” He reached over and pinched Harry’s cheek. “You are just too cute.” Harry swatted his hand away.

“I wonder if there could be a magical equivalent to that?” George questioned pointing at the television.

“I was pondering the same thing.” Fred nodded.

“Definitely has possibilities.” George considered.

“And profit.” Fred said. “We’ll have to look into this.”

“Definitely.” George grinned.

Harry smiled as the twins left the drawing room. “We’ve got to find out if that’s Cleo.” Ginny pulled at Harry’s arm. “Remus don’t you remember that kitten?”

“Not really.” Lupin shook his head trying to remember. “All I remember is trying to get away from Hagrid’s sneezes. Have you ever been hit by one of them? Not something you want to experience twice.”

“Who would remember?” Ginny asked then answered her own question. “Neville’s grandmother! Harry could we send her Hedwig with a picture of Cleo to her?”

“Sure.” Harry got up turned to Remus, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Granger and Tonks. “This was the best present. I can’t begin to tell you what it means to me. Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome Harry.” Mr. Weasley grinned. “You know me and muggle stuff. It was the first time I had Molly’s permission to mess with it.”

“What can I say Harry. You gave my family their very lives this Christmas.” Mr. Granger said gruffly. “If there is anything I can ever do for you all you need to do is ask.”

“It was a selfish gift Harry. I knew what might be on those tapes. I wanted to see them too.” Remus stiffly got to his feet. “I think I will go lie down a bit.” Tonks took his arm before Harry could. “I’m well looked after Harry.” A slight blush rose on the man’s cheeks but Harry saw he was quite content with Tonks fussing over him.

“Take it easy.” Harry said as Tonks led him out of the drawing room. Ginny pulled on his arm again. “What? Oh, right, the letter. Let’s go find a picture.” Ginny wrote a letter to Neville explaining the picture and the question about her cat’s origin. They would have to wait until night before sending Hedwig off so not to be too conspicuous with an owl flying off in broad daylight.

The rest of Christmas Harry spent playing games with Ron, Hermione and Ginny and occasionally Fred, George, Bill and Charlie. Percy appeared quietly to watch but never joined in any of the games. At first Harry thought it was his normal standoffish way but after Percy took several nasty tricks from Fred and George without saying a word Harry knew something was up with him.

But Harry was too worried about Remus to pay much attention to Percy. When he caught Remus off guard Harry could tell the man didn't feel very well. Harry quietly mentioned to Mr. Weasley if Remus shouldn't have stayed in the hospital wing. Mr. Weasley gazed at Lupin for a moment now talking to Fred and George and answered softly. "Sometimes family is the best medicine. Even Madam Pomfrey knows this. He would have felt worse to have missed Christmas with you."

Later after Harry climbed into bed the images and sounds of his parents swirled in his mind as sleep crept into his body. In the middle of a wide yawn a painful jolt from his scar drove away the all the peacefulness and contentment and replaced it with a wariness and immediately he braced himself for any intrusion. To his surprise Voldemort was quite, calm for having been bested.

"Happy to have your werewolf back?" The Dark Lord sneered.

"He's my friend, not my werewolf." Harry answered simply.

"Of course. Friends are important." Voldemort mocked.

"True friends yes." Harry didn't like the sound of the dark wizard's voice.

"Other people aren't as valuable to you are they?" Voldemort considered.

"What do you mean?" Harry listened closely despite the searing pain on his forehead.

"I mean I can see I've been going about this all wrong." Voldemort had a superior tone that made Harry shiver.

"I hope you aren't going to take all night to explain this." Harry hoped he could cause an angry response that might reveal more than Voldemort really wanted to.

"You do realize if your friends didn't die others would in their place." Voldemort's was stone cold now. "And it really doesn't matter who does it? As long it isn't a friend of yours I have no worries."

"Why?" Harry gasped as the pain became excruciating.

"Why? Because I have to show you I can." Voldemort said simply then without another word a wall seemed to go up between their thought and Harry neither heard his thoughts nor felt any pain.

He sat up so quickly he felt dizzy but ignoring that Harry got out of bed and ran to the door. At first he headed for Lupin's bedroom but stopped. Remus couldn't do anything. Turning in place in the dark hall Harry wondered who to tell. Bill and Charlie were out to a party and wouldn't be home that night. With a glance up Harry headed for Fred and George's room. They always seemed to know what to do he thought.

"Fred? George? I need to talk to you?" Harry rapped lightly on the door. It swung open and George was standing there.

"What's up Harry?" George pulled him in and shut the door. A tiny little creature with many legs ran up Harry's leg. At first Harry thought it was a spider but when George grabbed it with a gloved hand he could see it wasn't. "Great! I got it Fred!"

"What is that?" Harry stared at the strange thing.

"It's a drowser. We've been experimenting with it." George held the wispy legged thing to Fred who kept his distance as he opened a box for his twin to drop it into. "A little risky but what's the fun if there isn't a bit of risk."

"So Harry have you seen Dad and Mom snogging again and had a bad dream?" Fred still kept the box the at arm lengths from him. Harry shook his head.

In a short time Harry told the twins of his talk with Voldemort. The twins nodded. "Dumbledore mentioned Voldemort was likely to

retaliate with a vengeance.” Fred said soberly. Harry slumped down in the desk chair.

“So all I did was trade someone else’s life for Remus’s.” Harry rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“It’s not your fault Harry.” George pulled Harry to his feet and hoisted him over his shoulder then dumped him into a bed. “When you’re dealing with a mad lunatic like you-know-who, people are going to die.” He pushed Harry down on the pillow. “There’s nothing you can do and it’s not your fault.”

“Maybe.” Harry said sleepily, he could barely keep his eyes open. Once more he tried to form a coherent thought but it came out as a mumble. The last thing his brain registered was a ‘sweet dreams’ from Fred and a chuckle from George.

Author’s Notes: Thanks for the reviews!

Don’t be too worried if I don’t update as frequently. I do intend to finish this fic. I even know what the last line of the story is going to be...I just have to figure how to get there from here.

My thoughts on Harry’s animagi abilities; Yes it took Sirius, James and the rat three years to figure out how to do it, which they finally accomplished in their fifth year. Harry is in his 6th year so I figure he knows a bit more magic than when the Marauders started the procedure and Harry has the help of McGonagall. So I feel his progression is within his talents.

Chapter 37

A faint whisper penetrated Harry's sleep. Another soft voice answered the first. Harry yawned and didn't open his eyes not wanting to wake up yet. There was anticipation in the tone of the voices as Harry lay trying to shut the whispering out. Why was someone in his room anyway? He thought. He gave a great yawn again and blinked. The scene seemed wrong for some reason. Yawning once again he rubbed his eyes and stared up at the ceiling. No, that wasn't the ceiling that looked like the floor. Harry rubbed his eyes and reached out for his glasses on the night stand. After he had put his glasses on Harry focused on the ceiling. No it was the floor. What was the floor doing up there? It must be a dream. That's it. Harry thought sleepily. He wasn't really awake, just dreaming.

What was that snickering noise though? Harry thought irritably. He sat up to look and his pillow hit the floor with a soft flump. This is a really weird dream Harry considered trying to keep his pajama top down but again it bunched around his arm pits. Glancing around Harry noticed he wasn't in his own room. Then he noticed the only thing not on the floor above him (or was that below him?) was the bed and his night stand. He heard the snicker again and turned to the sound. Fred and George sat leisurely in chairs, casually sipping tea and pointing up at him.

"What?" Harry started to ask but the moment he spoke he felt himself fall. Grabbing futilely at the bedposts Harry dropped but landed softly on the mattress. The bed was back on the floor where it was supposed to be. He scrambled out of the bed to see the twins clapping.

"Good show old man." George said.

"I say." Fred nodded and primly clapped his hands in front of him.

"Okay what was that?" Harry laughed pulling his pajama top straight.

"The Bed Flop Flip." George took a clipboard from the desk and wrote a few things down. "You don't feel sleepy now do you?"

“No, that drop woke me up.” Harry shook his head.

“Good point.” Fred grinned. “We were afraid the drowser drool would be over powering.”

“What is a drowser? I’ve never heard of them before.” Harry looked around as if expecting to see a herd.

“A thing we had a devil of a time catching. You saw it last night, a creature that can cause sudden drowsiness.” Fred pointed to the box on the other side of the room.

“We have been investigating all auto crashes caused by drivers falling asleep at the wheel.” George showed Harry a stack of muggle newspapers.

“We made up a story of being insurance adjusters and search the cars.” Fred told him. Harry marveled at the length these two would go for a product.

“And it’s a good thing there are two of us because I don’t think one person could stay awake long enough to catch a drowser.” George said.

“Does it have to bite you or touch you or something?” Harry asked.

“No you just have to be near it.” Fred said. “George and I are pumped full of pepper up potion so it didn’t affect us last night.” He added, anticipating Harry’s next question.

“We want to thank you for participating in our little test, Harry.” George said formally.

“I feel honored to have been selected.” Harry laughed.

“As well you should.” Fred grinned. “But before a certain fussy mother comes looking for you, get yourself down to breakfast.”

“Okay,” Harry laughed again. Grinning at the twins Harry headed for his room to get dressed.

After breakfast Harry watched a while as Mr. Weasley and Mr. Granger tried to get the video player and television running again. They didn't seem to be having much luck but both were optimistic. While they worked Harry spoke to Mr. Weasley about his talk with Voldemort and the prospect of an attack on innocent people. The tall man nodded grimly.

"It is not unexpected Harry." Mr. Weasley sighed. "I know it isn't comforting or reassuring but it is you-know-whose way of causing fear and panic."

"I know." Harry felt a knot twist in his stomach. "But for us saving Remus and Snape, someone else will die."

"It isn't your fault Harry." Mr. Weasley looked at him sharply. "No one is forcing you-know-who to murder people. So don't you think for one second you have." Nodding, Harry felt a little better as he went in search of Ginny, Ron and Hermione.

The friends spent the day playing games and hanging out in the drawing room in hopes the video would be fixed. Just before dinner they all heard a loud slam coming from the kitchen. With a look of concern Mr. Weasley hurriedly led the way down to the basement.

When Harry entered the kitchen behind Ginny, he saw Mrs. Weasley with her face in her hands. Mrs. Granger sat beside her, patting her gently on the arm. Tonks had her hands on Lupin seemingly trying to get him to sit down. Pacing the kitchen Remus looked paler and angrier than Harry had ever seen him. On seeing Harry, Lupin flared.

"What were you thinking? Why didn't you tell us?" Lupin raged at him.

"Tell you what?" Harry stepped back.

"I bit Dumbledore!" Lupin growled in Harry's face.

"No! He said it was a tree branch." Harry paled. He heard a gasp from Mr. Weasley, Ron, Ginny and a soft 'oh no' from Hermione.

"We just received word from Minerva McGonagall, there was a smaller scratch." Tonks pulled at Lupin again. "It's become very infected over night and Madam Pomfrey is convinced it is a scrape from Remus."

"What does Dumbledore say?" Harry asked shakily.

"He still maintains it's a scratch from a tree limb." Tonks said. "But that is a symptom of being bitten, denial."

"If Dumbledore becomes a werewolf..." Mr. Weasley voice choked.

"So Snape can make him the wolf's bane potions and life will go on." Harry said not really believing his words himself.

"You don't understand Harry. If Dumbledore becomes a werewolf he is finished." Lupin eyes blazed. "He'll lose everything, the headmastership of Hogwarts, his position on the wizard council and the ability to influence people to help us. A werewolf is nothing in the wizarding world Harry. Worse than nothing." Lupin clenched his teeth. "My life isn't worth risking Dumbledore's life. Hell, my life isn't even worth..."

"If you say my life I'll knock you into next week...so help me." Harry interrupted stepping up to Lupin, his eyes flared too. "If we have to question the worth of every life we try to help then this war is for nothing. Is one life better than another?" He stood his ground. "If we believe that, we might as well join Voldemort and be done with it. Because that's his ideals isn't it?"

"Well said Harry." Everyone whirled around. Dumbledore stood in the kitchen doorway.

"Albus! Shouldn't you be in bed?" Molly jumped up with tears in her eyes and grabbed the headmaster's arm making him take a seat.

"I'm fine Molly." Dumbledore said. "It was as I told Harry. Madam Pomfrey finally found the sliver of wood causing the infection and healed it up in no time." In relief, Lupin slumped down in a chair with his face in his hands.

"Remus." Dumbledore said gently but Lupin did not look at him. "Harry is right you know. If we start choosing lives based on intelligence or power or some other imagined importance then we are no better than Voldemort."

"I suppose." Remus nodded then letting out a half snort. "Even so the next time you want to risk becoming a werewolf I know some that would oblige. I just don't want to be the one."

"I'll keep that in mind." Dumbledore chuckled.

"Harry," Remus stood up and faced him, looking ashamed. "I'm sorry I blew up at you. I was upset."

"I figured that." I'm just glad I didn't have to knock some sense into you." Harry gave a push to the man's shoulder.

"Oh you think you could?" Remus gave him a small shove back then grabbed Harry in a hug. "Thanks Harry. I do forget I still have friends."

"Not only friends you have family Remus." Harry corrected patting the man on the back.

"Yes," Remus glanced at the Weasleys and Grangers sheepishly as he released Harry. "I'm sorry for going off the deep end Molly, everyone." He raked a hand through his hair.

"You're allowed Remus." Mr. Weasley smiled. "But not too often, we do need a little bit of sanity in our group."

"Don't think anything of it Remus." Molly gave him a hug. "You've put up with my screeching often enough." A loud laugh rang around the kitchen but died when Mrs. Weasley glared at them.

“Now that is all settled,” Dumbledore smiled and turned to Harry. “I wondered if you would mind returning to Hogwarts for just a few minutes.” The way he spoke Harry knew what Dumbledore wanted.

“Sure. How? Should I turn into my phoenix form?” Harry offered.

“Oh no.” Dumbledore shook his head. “You were very fortunate it was Christmas Eve. Only three magical law enforcers were on duty that night.” Dumbledore wagged a finger at Harry. “The three were kept busy at a party in Sussex.”

“I wondered why I hadn’t heard anything from the ministry.” Harry said.

“We will go back by port key. You’ll be back within the hour.” Dumbledore rose ignoring the curious faces around them. He picked up a teacup.

“Not that one.” Mrs. Weasley snatched the cup out of Dumbledore’s hand then blushed as she realized how rude she had been. “It belongs to a set of my mothers. I have so little from my family.” She tried to explain then handed him a pot from the stove.

“Quite understandable.” Dumbledore took a pot and taped it with his wand. “Portus.” The pan shimmered and glowed with a blue light before becoming still again. “Ready Harry?” Dumbledore held out the pan and Harry touched it. “One two three.” With a jerk from behind his navel Harry felt himself being pulled forward with Dumbledore in a rush of color and sounds.

The headmaster’s office materialized around him. Harry caught the pot before it hit the floor. “With reflexes like that we could have used Molly’s cup.” Dumbledore smiled slightly. “The reason I asked you here is to choose the third memory I will visit.”

“I figured that.” Harry nodded.

“Once school resumes I doubt if I will have time.” Dumbledore unlatched the cupboard and remove the pensive. He placed the stone basin on his desk.

“Why not?” Harry walked over to the desk.

“I doubt if Professor Snape will be well enough to teach that soon.” Dumbledore face looked unusually serious. “I have looked for a substitute but good potion masters are hard to come by. Therefore I must teach the potions classes until Professor Snape is able to return.”

“Sounds like a lot of extra work for you.” Harry said thoughtfully.

“It can’t be helped.” Dumbledore sighed then looked pointedly at Harry with his wand raised. Harry nodded and leaned forward a bit. For a long time Dumbledore searched Harry’s mind for a promising memory to visit. Harry was just wondering if the headmaster ever intended to choose one when finally he felt the click of his thoughts leaving his mind. The silvery grey strand was added to the pensive.

“Thank you Harry. I’ll send you back so you can enjoy the rest of your holiday.” Dumbledore picked up a paperweight on his desk. “Portus.”

Before Harry touched it he gave the wizard a sharp look. “What about Percy?”

“I beg your pardon?” Dumbledore asked.

“Percy teaching potions classes. Maybe not OWL year and above but he certainly knows enough to teach first year through fourth year.” Harry explained.

Dumbledore took his time considering the suggestion then he began to nod. “You know that is an excellent idea Harry. He was quite good in potions. And...” Dumbledore’s face clouded a bit but he gave Harry a slight smile. “Perhaps having a Gryffindor teaching his class will encourage Professor Snape to a quicker recovery.”

“And it would help Percy too.” Harry said.

“Yes, he has been a bit subdued.” Dumbledore agreed. “A good plan all around, I’ll return with you and ask Percy straight away.”

“Like Percy would turn down a teaching potions at Hogwarts.” Harry snorted as Dumbledore held out the paperweight and he placed his finger on it.

When Dumbledore returned to his office later that evening, he felt his load considerably lightened thanks to Harry’s idea. Percy had been taken completely off guard by the offer of even a substitute teaching position. And Molly had been so excited, Dumbledore thought sure she would burst with pride.

The old wizard’s gaze went to the pensive on his desk he gave a sigh and walked over to it. He stared at the swirling grey substance for a moment then prodded it with his wand.

When the tumbling stopped Dumbledore blinked and looked around. There, lying on a cot under a thin sheet was a small black haired boy about five, with an eager expression on his face. The boy sat up listening. He peered through the keyhole that was the only light in the cupboard. Finally there were footsteps coming down the stairs. Dust and spiders rained down onto the boy. He brushed them away and seemed to hold his breath. Carefully five-year-old Harry opened the cupboard door. He padded down the hall to the kitchen and slowly pushed the door open. Dumbledore followed him watching. Aunt Petunia was getting breakfast but didn’t say anything to the little boy who had just entered. Little Harry peered on tiptoes over the kitchen table, obviously looking for something. The little boy seemed confused. He glanced at his aunt whose back was to him and the eager look vanished from his face.

At that moment Vernon Dursley came into the kitchen carrying a hefty blond boy. “There you go Dudders. Get out of the way boy!” He growled at the little Harry who scurried to one side. Then Uncle

Vernon sat Dudley on a chair then settled himself in a seat. "What do you want?" Uncle Vernon glared at little Harry.

"Where?" The boy's voice was so soft Dumbledore could barely hear it.

"Speak up or shut up boy!" His uncle demanded.

"Where are my presents?" Little Harry asked in a quivery voice.

"Presents?" Uncle Vernon sneered. "Why on earth would you be getting presents?" He disappeared behind his morning newspaper.

"It's my birthday." The little boy said a little louder. "Dudley got lots on his birthday..."

"Dudley belongs here. You on the other hand, do not." Uncle Vernon dropped his paper down to stare at the boy. "You should thank your lucky stars you have a roof over your head, boy." He snorted and pulled the paper back up. "As if he doesn't cost us enough and he wants presents." All this time Dudley made faces at Harry and anytime Harry came within reach the blond smacked or pinched him.

"Quit asking questions and sit down." Aunt Petunia barked as she put a plate of kippers on the table along with scrambled eggs and toast. Harry struggled into a chair and sat without eating for a long time. Then with a sad look on his face the little boy reached for his glass of juice and took a drink. As he went to set the glass back on the table Dudley pinched and pulled his arm and the glass fell to the floor and shattered.

"Are you all right Dudders?" Aunt Petunia shrieked and hurried over to rescue her son from the shards of glass. "You stupid boy. Go to your cupboard."

Harry shuffled out of the kitchen and back into the dark closet. To Dumbledore it seemed like hours went creeping by as he watched Harry sit on his cot and rock with a small pillow in his lap, tears rolling silently down his cheeks. Sounds swirled around the cupboard, Uncle Vernon going off to work, Aunt Petunia bustling around the

house, cooing over Dudley most of the time. The smell of lunch being cooked drifted in under the door. But no one came to get little Harry.

It wasn't until dinner that Harry ventured to leave his cupboard. Dumbledore followed the boy to the kitchen as the Dursleys were sitting down to eat. Quietly little Harry got into his seat. He took bite of a roll on his plate and looked around again.

"I don't even get a birthday cake?" Dumbledore closed his eyes as he listened to the berating the boy received. When the shouting had stopped Dumbledore opened them again. Harry wasn't crying but the look on the little boy's face caused tears to form in the old wizard's eyes. He didn't know how much more of this he could stand. As the meal continued Dumbledore looked around the gleaming kitchen but a plate crashing to the floor made him whip around.

"Idiot boy?" Uncle Vernon had Harry by the arm dragging him out of the chair.

"I didn't do it Dudley did." Harry cried. Smack. His uncle struck him across the face with the back of his hand with such force little Harry fell to the floor. Dumbledore gasped appalled.

"Don't you lie to me boy!" Uncle Vernon raged. "Get to your cupboard." Harry scrambled out the door and slipped back into the cupboard under the stairs. Dumbledore sat down on the cot beside the crying little boy. He hung his head.

"Albus?" Professor McGonagall was crouching in the cupboard. "Where are we?" It took a long moment for the headmaster to answer.

"Harry's room on his fifth birthday." Dumbledore pointed to the small child crying with out making a sound.

"My word! What happened to him?" McGonagall stooped to examine a bruise on the side of the boy's face.

"His uncle struck him." Dumbledore said with such anger McGonagall stood up to look at him. She started to say something but at that moment Harry slid off the bed. Kneeling beside the cot, little Harry folded his small hands in prayer.

"Dear God,

Please, take me to heaven to be with you. The minister said you take care of little children. I wouldn't make noise or eat too much. I promise. I could be with my mum and dad. Please God. Amen."

"Oh Albus." McGonagall gasped tears streaming down her face. Dumbledore reached out a hand to lay it on the boy's head but he couldn't touch the memory, so he wiped the tears from his own eyes instead.

Suddenly the cupboard door opened. "Get out here boy. And clean up this mess you made." Uncle Vernon dragged Harry to the kitchen where Aunt Petunia gave him a mop and bucket. "Get to work." His uncle barked as they left the kitchen.

"He's barely bigger than the bucket." McGonagall had her hand to her mouth. "How do they expect a little boy like that to mop?"

Harry sank to the floor holding on to the mop handle looking utterly defeated. The pieces of broken dish had been taken away but bits of food remained on the floor. Little Harry spotted them and squirmed on to his belly and started licking the crumbs up of the shiny vinyl.

"That's the most he's had to eat all day Minerva." Dumbledore said through the tears in his eyes. "On his birthday."

"What are you doing here Albus?" McGonagall turned from the small boy to the wizard.

"It's a deal with Harry." He sat down at the kitchen table to watch the little boy and told McGonagall about the agreement. "I got to select the days. I searched his memory for good feelings." He wiped his hand across his face. The boy had gotten to his feet and put the mop in the bucket. Little Harry tried and tried but he couldn't pull the water

filled mop up out of the bucket. A scared look crossed the boy's face and he kept giving the door worried glances. Then little Harry ran to the sink and opened the cupboard beneath it. The boy searched through the bottles of cleaners and pulled a couple out.

"At least he'll be able to get the floor clean with that." McGonagall said in relief but then gasped.

Harry had started to drink the cleanser; he gagged several times but kept drinking. When he finished one bottle the little boy went to the next. He had trouble opening that one so he grabbed another from the under the sink.

"What did I do to him Minerva?" Albus Dumbledore slid down to kneel on the floor beside the little boy. "No child should want to die." The memory started to fade and Dumbledore and McGonagall found themselves back in Dumbledore's office. Sinking into his chair, Dumbledore put his face in his hands and McGonagall patted his back as she wiped her own tears from her eyes.

Author's notes: Reviews feed the writing monster inside of me!
Thanks!

Chapter 38

“So Harry, are you ever going to tell us what Dumbledore wanted last night?” Ron asked as he moved his knight.

“He doesn’t have to tell us everything.” Hermione said looking up from the book she was reading on Ron’s bed.

“I think he should.” Ron countered. “We are his best friends.”

“But that doesn’t mean he has to tell us.” Hermione argued.

Harry tried to keep from laughing as he stared at the chessboard. It was the middle of the afternoon. He had expected them to ask about Dumbledore long before this. In truth he didn’t feel any real need to keep his deal with Dumbledore a secret. It just hadn’t come up in any of their conversations. Harry gave a furtive glance to Ginny, who was at Ron’s desk reading, writing and grumbling. Holiday homework was never fun.

“I suppose I can tell you.” Harry moved his queen to take Ron’s rook. “I haven’t said anything because it is really between Dumbledore and me.” When he leaned back in his chair Ron, Hermione and Ginny were staring at him. “Alright, alright.” Harry watched Ron’s eyes grow big as he told his friends about Dumbledore visiting his memories. Hermione and Ginny seemed at a loss for words.

“I...” Ron’s voice cracked when he finally spoke. He cleared his throat then said. “Only you could get away with something like that Harry.” Ron moved a bishop.

Harry frowned. He hated any mention of him getting special treatment because of who he was. He studied the chessboard in irritation. This was where Ron usually beat him in chess.

“What memories did Dumbledore visit Harry?” Ron asked as he watched Harry intently.

“Ron, think about what you just said.” Hermione snorted. A look of realization crossed the freckled face.

"Oh, right." Ron stared at Harry even harder. "Don't you notice any gaps in your memory? Where the days he took out were?"

"No." Harry shook his head. "For one thing I think of those days as little as possible and secondly unless it was a gap in a series of events I'm not likely to miss three days from my memory." He put his hand on a knight that was in jeopardy but didn't move it.

"But you will get the memories back." Hermione assured him.

"I really don't care if I do or don't." Harry snorted.

"But what did Dumbledore say about the memories he's seen?" Ginny asked.

"I don't know." Harry took his hand off the knight. A slight hopeful flicker in Ron's eyes warned Harry the knight wasn't the piece to move.

"It would drive me nuts not knowing." Ginny said staring at Harry as if he belonged to a different species.

"I suppose we'll discuss it after the holidays." Harry said in such a casual way all three snorted in exasperation. "I have had other things to think about you know." He gave them a scathing glance and moved his rook.

"I suppose." Ron frowned at the board. He seemed genuinely surprised by Harry's move. As he concentrated on his chess game a soft click was heard along the wall. Ron looked up in annoyance then he gasped. "How did she get in here?" The runespoor slithered along the floor hissing. All three sets of her eyes flashed in irritation.

"What's up Hapa?" Harry watched her searching the corners and under the bed.

"The rat is loose." Hapa hissed and Harry leapt to his feet knocking the chessboard over.

“What?” Harry cried. “What do you mean? He’s dead. He can’t be loose.”

“The rat is loose.” Hapa repeated flowing toward the wall near the bed. “I have told the cats. They hunt too.” With a flick of her nose she slid a small panel aside and disappeared into the wall.

“Harry, what’s going on?” Ron grumbled as he picked up the chess pieces. Harry was hurrying toward the door.

“Hapa said the rat is loose. Didn’t they take Wormtail’s body away yet?” Harry asked as he opened the door. A slight gasp came from Ginny and Ron froze.

“I don’t know.” Hermione looked frightened. “With the holiday I doubt they would have done anything.” Harry led the way at a run and bumped into Tonks and Remus on the stairs.

“Hapa says Wormtail’s on the loose again.” Harry told them. “Was he really dead?” Both faces paled and without another word they all dashed for the spare room where Pettigrew’s body had been laid.

Tonks threw the door open and cursed. Remus leaned tiredly against the door frame as they all looked at the sheet which now covered nothing but floor. “We have to alert Dumbledore.” Tonks said angrily. “Remus, you go to bed or I swear I’ll haul your sorry butt back to Madam Pomfrey.”

“Can’t you just tell Phineas Nigellus Black and he could tell Dumbledore.” Hermione asked.

“Phineas Nigellus Black will obey the headmaster of Hogwarts and deliver any messages Dumbledore sends but he will not listen to us anymore not since Sirius’s death.” Remus said.

“You go tell Dumbledore, Tonks. We’ll take care of Remus and tell the rest of the house.” Ginny grabbed Lupin’s arm and Hermione took the other. Tonks grinned at them and gave Remus a kiss on the cheek and darted down the stairs.

“Look I’m fine. I promise. I’ll go lay down.” Remus tried to free his arms from the two girls but they weren’t letting go.

“Better not fight them Remus.” Harry would have laughed if the situation had been different. “Come on Ron we better find your folks.” A knot twisted in Harry’s stomach as they headed for the first floor.

“What do you think he’ll do?” Ron asked as they came to the drawing room. “Murder us in our sleep?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.” Harry said and slid the door open. As he expected Mr. Weasley and Mr. Granger was still working on the video player.

Within a half hour, the house teemed with members of the order. For the rest of the day they searched every nook and cranny for the rat. To Harry’s irritation, he, Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Mr. and Mrs. Granger were put under guard while the hunt went on. When the pursuit proved futile the members gathered in the kitchen to discuss what needed to be done.

From what little Harry had over heard in snatches of conversations with the coming and going of the order’s members, Pettigrew must have used some form of the draft of living death and the biggest debate was whether to give Pettigrew a way out or make sure he couldn’t escape. Both choices had their good points and bad. Let Pettigrew loose meant the occupants of the house were much safer but freed to return to Voldemort was the last thing anybody wanted. As risky as it sounded, Harry was in favor of keeping the rat confined. Because once released who knows what more damage the traitor could do?

Hedwig arrived back at Grimmauld place later in the evening. Harry stroked the snowy owl while Ginny opened the letter he had removed from Hedwig’s leg.

“There are a couple of pictures.” Ginny handed the letter to Harry to read as she examined the photos.

“Dear Ginny,

I asked my Gran about Cleo and while she remembers Hagrid bring a cat to the party she doesn't recall much about it. Gran hunted through some photos and the cat appears in only these two.

I sure would like to see those pictures things you wrote about in your letter. I hope we can arrange it some time.

Say Hi to everyone and I guess I'll see you back at Hogwarts.

Neville.”

“Well?” Harry leaned over Ginny's shoulder to look at the pictures.

“I don't know. The cat keeps hiding.” She handed one picture to Harry. The photo kitten lurked next to a chair and frequently scampered underneath.

“Where is Cleo?” Harry asked. “I need to see her to be able to compare.” Ginny and Harry went off on their own search. They found the black and white cat nestled with a grumpy looking Crookshanks on the bed in Hermione's room.

“I don't know why you would think it could be Cleo.” Hermione frowned over the rolls of parchment in front of her on the desk. “Cleo is a kitten and the cat in the video is obviously a kitten.” She said as if the case was closed.

“I can't explain it but I know it is Cleo.” Ginny insisted.

“And if it is the same cat what would that mean?” Ron looked a little bit worried.

“I would like to know how it is possible.” Hermione said firmly.

“I don't know Ginny.” Harry finally spoke after examining the photos. “The cat looks similar but a lot of cats are marked like Cleo.” He

jokingly held the picture up to the kitten's face. "Is that you Spy Cat?" Harry pointed to the single white paw showing from beneath the chair.

Cleo stared at the photo and made a chirping noise. The picture cat crept out from under the chair and sat primly beside Neville as if she was the subject of the photo. Another purrr from Cleo and the photo cat stretched and turned around.

"It does look like her." Ginny said excitedly. "You have to admit that Hermione."

"Like Harry said a lot of cats look a like." Hermione said still not convinced.

"I wonder what happened to the cat after the party." Ron said thoughtfully. "If Harry's folks kept it, Remus would have remembered it better. Same for Neville's Gran."

"That's a mystery too." Ginny beamed at her brother, thrilled he seemed to be on her side. Harry's mind wandered to the people at the party. Maybe someone took the kitten home with them. Maybe Hagrid would know.

Watching Ron still looking at the photos Harry suddenly noticed a glint of gold on ring finger of his right hand. "Ron..." Harry tried not to grin too much. "Where did you get the ring?" The redhead's ears went pink.

"Hermione gave it to me for Christmas. Didn't I show you?" Ron managed in a normal voice.

"No." Harry glanced at Hermione who had pink cheeks. A quick look at her right hand showed a matching ring. She raised an eyebrow as if daring him to tease Ron. "Uh, nice ring." Harry said as Ginny stifled a snicker.

"I think we should put this mystery to rest for the night." Hermione said sternly. "You boys better be in your assigned rooms before lock down or Moody will have your skins."

"I'm glad Harry sorted it out better than having us all in one room with your folks like Moody wanted Hermione." Ron snorted.

"Me too." Hermione laughed then she leaned over and stroked her cat. "Crookshanks, you have to sleep in Mom and Dad's room tonight okay?" The ginger cat stretched arching his back and clawing at her blanket. "Please keep watch over them for me." Her voice held a tinge of fear. Crookshanks meowed and rubbed against her before jumping down off the bed and padding out of the room.

"Do you think Cleo can handle a rat?" Ron gazed at the small black and white cat. "She isn't very big."

"She never tackled you in Gryffindor tower?" Harry nudged the redhead to follow him out. "A rat doesn't stand a chance against Cleo."

"How do I know you're not just saying that to impress Ginny?" Ron glanced back at the girls as he closed the door.

"I don't want anything to happen to Ginny or Hermione." Harry said a bit irked.

"Sorry." Ron said sheepishly. "I guess I'm getting a bit jumpy knowing that rat alive and well."

"Understood." Harry clapped his hand on Ron's shoulder as they entered Harry's room. A second bed stood along the wall and Ron's trunk was at the foot. "I guess we can sleep the easiest. There's no way Wormtail can get past Hapa, Kesho and Giza."

The New Year came and went with no sighting of Peter Pettigrew in human or rat form by any human, cat or serpents eyes, though the runespoor insisted the rat was still around. The tenseness in the house grew and Harry began to look forward to returning to Hogwarts but then felt guilty because the Weasleys, Grangers and Remus would still have to be watchful.

Remembering a promise Harry sought out Mrs. Granger to help him record as many runespoor stories as they could before returning to school. In the time he spent with her, Harry found he like Hermione's mother very much. Mother and daughter were very similar but Mrs. Granger seemed a lot more relaxed than Hermione.

Mr. Granger, Mr. Weasley and Remus, when Tonks would let him, still worked trying to get the video recorder operating. And even though the two men said they were very close Harry wasn't very confident as the remaining day of the holiday vacation dwindled. Then a small explosion sent all hope up in a puff of smoke.

"What happened?" Mrs. Weasley had her hands on her hips glaring at Mr. Weasley as he and Mr. Granger came out of the drawing room with a large quantity of black smoke and the household converged at the drawing room door.

"I'm not quite sure." Mr. Weasley started coughing. His wife looked contrite for scolding him and pulled out her wand to vanish the smoke.

"I'm sorry Arthur. Are you both alright?" Mrs. Weasley took his arm. Harry noticed they both looked very tired. The constant patrolling of the house was taking its toll.

"I'm fine. Robert?" Mr. Weasley looked at Mr. Granger.

"I'm alright." He smiled as his wife took his arm then looked at Harry. "Sorry Harry." Harry's face went pale.

"My tapes!" Harry gasped and darted into the still hazy room.

"Your tapes are fine." Mr. Granger pointed to the shelf. The video camera and three tapes from the trunk were carefully placed away from the still smoking electronics. "I made sure we practiced on tapes that were expendable."

"Thanks." Harry sighed in relief then looked ruefully at the equipment. "I guess we'll have to wait to see the rest."

"I'm afraid so." Mr. Weasley said. "But surely we'll get something running by Easter and you can all pop in and we'll watch the rest."

"Do you think Neville could come to see them?" Harry asked thoughtfully.

"I don't see why not." Remus said. "I'll make the arrangements. We're sure to have this running by then."

"I think I'll put these back in my trunk for safe keeping." Harry picked up the tapes and camera. "There's a rat about you know." Nobody laughed but Harry hadn't meant it to be funny. It was a serious reminder that Wormtail was capable of any kind of hurt or damage.

The evening before their return to Hogwarts, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were in Harry's room talking. Harry's mind had drifted a little as Ron and Hermione bickered about something to do with S.P.E.W. Then Harry noticed Ginny watching him and they sat grinning stupidly at each other. A flush rose in his cheeks as Harry realized there were a few things he needed to discuss with Ginny alone. Things he had taken for granted which he knew he shouldn't. Harry tried hard to find an excuse to leave his own room but his mind was distracted from making up a plausible story by Cleo jumping into his lap every few minutes.

"Spy Cat. That's like the fiftieth time you've come up here." Harry picked the kitten up. "What do you want?" The black and white kitten squirmed to get down but the moment Harry set her on the floor she jumped back on his lap and meowed at him. She wouldn't even let Ginny detain her.

"She wants you to follow her." Hapa hissed from near the fire.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Why what?" Ron stared at Harry.

“Hapa said Cleo wants me to follow her.” Harry explained the part of the conversation the others had missed.

“She has something for you.” Hapa replied to the question.

“Something for me? What?” Harry now turned to the runespoor which had slithered over to the four. “It isn’t a dead mouse is it?”

For a long moment the serpent did not answer then said. “No, no mouse. She does not know what to call it. She is young but she knows it is important for you.” Cleo sat looking at the runespoor intently.

“Where is this thing she wants me to have?” Harry questioned in English so the others could follow part of the discussion.

Cleo put her paw carefully on the runespoor thick coils. Her tail flicked then gave a couple of quick lashes. “Where the dog chased her.” Hapa said carefully.

“In that alley between the buildings?” Harry asked a sudden feeling of excitement stirred in him as Hapa confirmed this.

“Harry you can’t go outside. It’s too dangerous.” Hermione said emphatically.

“If I wear my invisibility cloak and the boots of silence I got for my birthday, nobody would be able to see or hear me.” Harry’s mind was working fast. It had to be tonight because tomorrow they would be back at Hogwarts.

“No, Harry.” Hermione glared at him then Ron like he was helping Harry by not saying anything.

“Hermione, if something happens all I have to do is change to my phoenix form and I’m safe and sound back here.” Harry reasoned.

“But you would get in loads of trouble for under age magic. And for what?” Hermione glared at the cat and runespoor. “The whim of a silly kitten.

“Cleo is smart Hermione.” Ginny’s face was flushed for a battle to defend her cat. “As smart as Crookshanks. You would listen to him.” The black and white cat went over to Harry and stared at him as only cats can stare. The urge to follow the cat was strong but Harry had to admit to himself Hermione might have a point.

“Hapa? What do you think?” Harry asked in parseltongue. “Is the cat setting me up?”

The eyes of the runespoor glowed red. “Only humans can lie affectively. She says what she believes to be true.”

“Why did she only mention it now?” Hermione questioned Harry. “Seems oddly coincidental she tells you after Pettigrew is free.” Harry turned to listen the runespoor interpret the cat’s intentions.

“The picture made her remember.” Harry said then paused as Hapa spoke again. “She remembers the place before here.” He said hesitantly. “What ever that means.”

“But still Harry.” Hermione began.

“Give it a rest Hermione.” Ron said. “He’s old enough to make his own decisions.” Hermione glared at him.

“I don’t mind her opinion, Ron.” Harry admitted trying not to remember the events at the ministry and Hermione’s warnings then. “And she has some good points. Still what if what Spy Cat has is very important.” He stopped Hermione from saying anything. “I don’t know what it could be but perhaps I should find out.”

“Well, I can’t stop you from going so just be careful.” Hermione seemed pacified Harry had considered her arguments.

“I will.” Harry assured her.

“Good luck.” Ron whispered as Harry slipped out of their bedroom at midnight. Harry didn’t answer. Ron was trying to be a good sport about being left behind but their combined growth spurts made it difficult for the two of them to be completely covered under the cloak and although Harry hadn’t said, Ron’s large feet made the lanky teen a bit clumsy.

Making his way slowly down the stairs Harry was thrilled when he noticed the boots didn’t even make the steps squeak. Arriving at the front door Harry relaxed a bit. He shifted his hold on the black and white kitten and reached for the many locks on the door.

“Where do you think you’re going Potter?” A gravelly voice came out of nowhere. Harry whirled around to see Mad-eye Moody pull an invisibility cloak off his head.

For a few moments Harry stuttered and tried to come up with some story but he sighed then pulled off his cloak and brought out the kitten and explained his expedition. Moody was not happy.

“I can’t believe you would be that big of fool Potter.” The man snarled. “I don’t trust that cat and I trust that runespoor even less.”

“And me least of all?” Harry added, eying the Auror seriously. The old wizard squinted at him and nodded.

“You said it Potter.” Moody scowled and added with a jerk of his grizzled head. “Now get back to bed.”

Author’s notes: My, the reviews on that last chapter!! I’ll have to remember sad chapters get more reviews than happy ones! LOL Thanks!

I had written the third pensive memory first when I started the story and I thought of Dumbledore visiting Harry’s memories.

Chapter 39

For once there was no rushing around in the morning to catch the train back to Hogwarts. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were all going back by port key. The runespoor flatly refused to travel in such away again but Harry could see no other way to take her back to school other than by floo powder which wasn't much better.

So after numerous attempts to coax the runespoor into a crate, Harry finally had to order Hapa to enter, evoking the power of the shield itself. Hissing in protest the three heads spat insults at Harry from between the thick slats. As they waited for the port key to be made, Harry had to stifle his laughter as the Giza continued to criticize him.

Harry gazed wistfully at the front door. Moody had not moved from his post all the pervious night and for good measure had left his invisibility cloak off so Harry could see he was still there. For some reason Moody not trusting him didn't bother Harry all that much. Maybe it was because that was the way Moody treated most people. Harry considered. 'Or maybe,' Harry suddenly thought. 'Maybe it was because the Moody Harry really knew had been an imposter. So he didn't trust Moody all that much himself'.

He had considered turning into a phoenix and taking Cleo to the alley but a little voice in his head, which sounded again much like Hermione told him it was a foolish thing to do. Somehow he had to find out what the cat wanted though. Harry glanced at the carrier and a white paw was reaching out of a hole, patting at Ginny's arm.

Professor McGonagall held out the port key for them to touch. All three heads of the runespoor gave a loud hiss as Harry placed a finger on the Ladies Room sign. McGonagall gave a count of three and all were pulled forward in a rush of wind and color.

Quickly Harry put his things away in the dorm. He had given up trying to talk to the runespoor. All three heads angrily hissed at him when he tried to apologize so he left her to brood. With a little time left

before dinner Harry hurried down to the common room to find Ginny, leaving Ron still sorting through the trunk Fred had packed and he hadn't done anything with since. Ginny stood near the common room fireplace warming her hands. A smile lit her face when she turned and saw Harry.

"Good, just the person I wanted to see." Harry said then added seriously. "Can I talk to you alone?" The smile disappeared from Ginny's face but she nodded and followed Harry to an empty class room not far from the Fat Lady's painting.

"First of all, I think I owe you this." Harry gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for the Christmas present."

Ginny grinned and kissed him back. "I owed you too. Thanks for the locket."

Taking a deep breath Harry gazed at Ginny earnestly and took her hand. "Ginny since we've spent so much time together I just started assuming some things. Then I thought, one night of dancing doesn't make a couple. Does it?"

"Not really." Ginny agreed watching Harry intently.

"I didn't think so." He sighed and kept her gaze trying to judge her feelings. "So would you please go to the next dance with me?" Harry asked.

"I would love to." Her eyes shown with a light Harry never noticed before. "And I really appreciate you not taking it for granted I would go with you just because I went to the first one with you." Ginny said.

"I am a bit clueless about this girl boy stuff. But eventually I'll get some of it figured out...I hope." Harry laughed nervously and rubbed his neck.

"I'll try to be patient while you work things out." Ginny giggled.

"Ginny?" Harry stepped closer gazing searchingly into her eyes. He swallowed hard. "Would you be my girlfriend? I know we've only had

the one date but we have spent a lot of time together doing things. Even slept in the same bed....ouch." He flinched as she slugged his arm with her fist.

"Don't you ever say that in public Harry Potter!" She tucked her hair behind her ear and glare at him. "Not even in fun."

"Sorry, wrong thing to say." Harry rubbed his arm sure there was a bruise. He didn't remember Dudley's punch hurting that much. Her fists were almost sharp compared to his cousin's meaty hands. "Like I said I'm new at this relationship stuff."

"I'll be patient to a point." Ginny said sternly. "But if something like that got around..."

"Point taken." Harry held his hand up. "I promise I'll never utter those words again." This wasn't going as smoothly as Harry had hoped. Gazing at the floor he asked again. "Did I blow it then? For you to be my girl?" He glanced at her dolefully.

"Almost." Ginny tried hard not to grin. Then she took both of his hands and making him look at her, she said. "I would love for you to be my boyfriend." Harry gave her a smile that made her heart leap. Reclaiming one of his hands, Harry cupped her cheek and slowly bent in for a kiss.

"Are we interrupting anything?" Ron's voice snorted. "The Fat Lady said you had come in here. Best not to use a room in her line of sight. She's a blabbermouth."

"Weasley, I am going to hurt you." Harry turned to glare at the couple standing in the doorway. Hermione was pulling at Ron's arm trying to get him to leave.

"Come on Harry. Let's go down to dinner." Ginny gave Hermione and Ron fierce look as she took his hand. She didn't let go of Harry's hand until the four of them sat down in the great hall.

Up at the staff table Harry saw Percy seated next to McGonagall. The young wizard alternated between looking pompous and important to

being a bit anxious and humbled by being among the experienced teachers.

A round face boy sat down across from Harry. "Hi Neville, have a good holiday?" Ginny asked.

"It was okay." Neville said soberly. "You?" He included all four in the question. Harry nodded knowing the full explanation of what happened on their holiday wasn't for casual conversation. "Harry, I forgot to tell you something in the letter." Neville started piling food on his plate. "My Gran said your mother and father were my godparents and my mother was your godmother."

Harry felt his mouth drop open. Nobody had ever mentioned anything about a godmother. But then again, he had never asked. "I didn't know that Neville." He finally managed to respond. "It seems reasonable though with the two of us being born on the same day."

"Yeah," Neville nodded starting on the plate of food he had filled. "Were my parents really on that picture thing?" He asked softly.

"The video tape." Harry corrected. "Yeah. Hermione's and Ron's dads promise to have it running by Easter and we are going back to watch the tapes. You can come too Neville."

"Oh thanks Harry!" Neville said excitedly. "I can't wait."

"It's an emotional rollercoaster I warn you Neville." Harry cautioned.

"Yeah, you'll get to see Harry pee on Lupin." Ron snorted. "Very upsetting." Then he snorted again but this time like a pig.

Harry felt Ginny giggling beside him. "You're just asking for it Ron." He tried hard not to laugh but when Hermione cracked, Harry broke down too. Recovering, he gave a rueful smile to Neville. "It is worth it though." Harry admitted.

After dinner Harry hurried Ginny out of the great hall. Taking a couple of hidden stairs they left Ron and Hermione far behind and found another unoccupied classroom to use. "I wasn't quite finished talking

with you when your thick brother interrupted." Harry said as he closed the door. Ginny looked expectantly at him and he swallowed hard.

"I don't know if this is the right thing." Harry fingered something in the pocket of his robes. "But as my girlfriend I want you to have this." He pulled out a delicate white gold bracelet. Six small perfectly cut emeralds lay in one direction on six separate intertwined stems. One slightly larger emerald branched in the opposite way. The gems glowed green in the torch light.

"Oh Harry, it's beautiful but that's way too much to spend on me." Ginny protested.

"I didn't buy it." Harry shook his head. "I found it in the box with my mother's letters." He opened the hinge and looked hopefully at her.

"But Harry, if it was your mother's you'll want to keep it." Ginny still hesitated.

"What good is it sitting in a box? I'd rather you have it." Harry insisted. "Please?"

"Well, okay." Ginny held out her arm and Harry fastened the bracelet on to her wrist. "But if we break up I will give it back to you." She assured him.

"What?" Harry gave her a mock look of shock. "We just get together and you're planning our break up?"

Ginny shook her head. "No, I plan on keeping this forever." Her eyes shown with tears and she reached up to kiss him.

"There you are Potter." The door had been flung opened and Professor McGonagall stepped inside. "The headmaster wants to see you."

"Now?" Harry asked gritting his teeth. Ginny leaned her forehead against his chest trying to suppress her giggles without much success.

"Yes, now Potter." McGonagall frowned and seemed to have just noticed Ginny. She eyed the pair critically. "I think you should return to Gryffindor tower Miss Weasley. Now Potter." She prodded, gesturing for him to go ahead.

"See you later Ginny." Harry gave her hand a squeeze and she smiled at him.

"We weren't doing anything wrong, Professor." Ginny gave the transfiguration teacher a glare as she went out the door. "See you later Harry."

"I should think not." McGonagall closed the door to the classroom. She turned on her heel and led the way to the stone gargoyles that stood outside the entrance to Dumbledore's office. She gave the password. "Chocolate covered almonds."

"The Headmaster wishes to see you alone." McGonagall said and gave Harry a nod to go on up the turning spiral staircase. Harry stepped on to it and watched the entrance close then he looked up as he rose to Dumbledore's office. Before he could knock the door opened.

"Come in Harry." Dumbledore had personally opened the door. The headmaster looked tired and careworn. The lines in his face appeared even deeper than when Harry had seen him during the holidays. His bright blue eyes were dim and held none of the sparkle Harry usually saw in them, like the spark had been extinguished. Dumbledore avoided meeting his eyes. "I think." He looked around his office considering something. "Yes, we'll discuss this in my chambers if you have no objections?" Harry shook his head. "Good. It is a bit more comfortable."

Taking his wand out Dumbledore tapped it on the mantle and walked through the fireplace, at the last moment he took Harry's arm. The next instant Harry found himself in a drawing room. Two comfortable looking high backed chairs stood by the crackling fire on a large bold patterned hearth rug.

Up a couple of steps to his right there was a large library with books in shelves which reached to the high ceiling. A tall ladder on wheels rode the curve of the area and gave a person access to the upper bookshelves. To Harry's left was a curtained area, he assumed was the headmaster's sleeping chamber.

"Please sit down, Harry." Dumbledore indicated the chair on the right by the fire. From the looks of it Harry could tell this was where normally Dumbledore sat.

"But that's your chair." Harry said. "I'll be fine in this other."

"Yes, that's where I sit but for tonight, please." Dumbledore quiet insistence made Harry nod. He sat down feeling strangely like a teacher with an erring student because Dumbledore took the seat opposite him and the headmaster looked very guilty staring at the fire. It took the old wizard a few moments to gather his thoughts. When he finally spoke Dumbledore's voice was subdued and full of emotion.

"I have been in the three days of your childhood as we agreed." The old man swallowed hard and finally looked over to meet Harry's eyes. "When a person makes a mistake so horrendous no amount of regret is acceptable but I do have to say it. I am so sorry Harry." Dumbledore's voice cracked. "I had no idea." He held up a hand to keep Harry from interrupting. "No, let me finished. I had no idea your life was so atrocious. And I should have known." Dumbledore drew a breath. "You should not have gone to the Dursleys."

The flash of anger in Harry's eyes made the headmaster drop his gaze again. He sighed. "I hope..." The old man faltered, rubbed his face and took another choppy breath. In a whisper Dumbledore asked. "Can you ever forgive me for what I have done?" He glanced up at the stony expression on the young man's face.

Staring intently at Dumbledore, he shrugged and in a voice carefully guarded, Harry said. "I'm not sure." The old wizard's face fell.

"I understand." Tears stood in Dumbledore's eyes. "I really don't blame you. Harry, I'm sure I've damaged any hope of becoming what you would call a friend and I have no right to make any demands for

you to even try. But I am here to help you with the best of my abilities." He looked back to the fire and found it difficult to swallow. "I don't know what else to say. I still can not change the past." He hung his head waiting for Harry to speak.

Drawing in a breath Harry let it out again, thinking. He glanced at the old wizard hunched up against the onslaught of wrath he obviously expected. "I've thought a lot about what I would say to you when we finally talked about my memories." Harry watched Dumbledore. "Funny thing is, I can't remember the exact wording. And I worked so hard, perfecting every biting remark of you ruining my life and all." He said scathingly then the tone in his voice changed to and he casually added. "I guess I should have written them down." Harry sighed and leaned forward his elbows on his legs.

"But since I can't think of my insults, I suppose," He gazed at the headmaster benignly. "I'll have to forgive a manipulative balmy old codger of a wizard. That is, if you can forgive a moody impulsive lunatic teenage wizard." Harry's voice was serious but in it was a tinge of humor.

Which Dumbledore obviously heard. His head came up and he gazed at Harry uncertainly. Like a switch being thrown, Harry saw the twinkle in those blue eyes suddenly reappear. A smile twitched at the silvery white beard. "I suppose I could." Dumbledore said slowly. Harry slid off the chair and knelt beside the old wizard's seat, looking up at him and putting a hand on his knee.

"I know it was harsh but I had to make you see." Harry said with tears in his eyes.

"That you did my boy." Dumbledore put a hand on Harry's shoulder, blinking hard. "I told you last summer how proud I was of you, all the things you had been through. But I think now I feel even more so."

"Why is that?" Harry asked.

"To have a childhood like yours and you still have a kind heart." Dumbledore put his hand on Harry's cheek. "You should hate me for what I did but here you are forgiving me."

"If you want, I could shout at you a bit more?" Harry said innocently.

Dumbledore laughed, tears shining in his eyes. He patted Harry's cheek. "That's quite alright. Although you are quite good at it, I am sure there will be other opportunities to do so in the future."

"I suppose there will be." Harry smiled slightly. "At any rate I was getting tired of being angry at you. Everybody but Professor McGonagall thought I was being way too hard on you."

"Professor McGonagall took your side?" Dumbledore looked shocked.

"Not really but she said you were quite capable of sorting things out without her help." Harry laughed.

"That I'm not entirely sure about." Dumbledore said seriously. He gazed searchingly into Harry's eyes. "There are still things we need to discuss and clear up Harry."

"And establish some ground rules." Harry added moving back to the chair.

"Precisely." Dumbledore agreed but he seemed hesitant to speak.

"You want me to go first?" Harry offered.

"That would be helpful. How about some tea?" Dumbledore raised his wand and at Harry's nod, he conjured a small table with a tray with teapot, cups and cakes. After pouring tea for the both of them Dumbledore gestured for Harry to continue.

"First off, I will not go back to the Dursleys next summer." Harry said firmly.

"I agree unconditionally." Dumbledore said sadly.

Harry eyed him for a moment then said quietly. "I need you to stop treating me like I'm just an answer to a prophecy you have to protect."

"Have I?" Dumbledore looked genuinely surprised. "When?"

"There have been so many times this school year already." Harry struggled to keep his anger in check. "I realize now you didn't even know you were doing it."

"I didn't." Dumbledore insisted. "Tell me, because I do need an example if I am to correct my behavior."

"On the tower." Harry thought back. "I was so angry with you and all you could say was we needed to work together to defeat Voldemort." He swallowed to keep the memory of his rage back and unexpectedly tears sprang to his eyes. "I needed to hear you..."

"What Harry?" Dumbledore reached over and placed a hand on Harry's.

At first all Harry could do was shrug in answer and wipe his cheeks. "I just needed you to talk to me like I was somebody important to you, other than the fulfiller of a stupid prophecy."

"I didn't realize that was the way I was coming across." Dumbledore said sadly. "I was so afraid, Harry." He admitted, giving a deep sigh. "Afraid your anger for me would drive you to the dark arts. All I could think to try to dissuade you was to remind you of Voldemort and what he has become. "

His brow furrowed in thought, Harry asked slowly. "Professor, have you ever used dark magic?" When Dumbledore hesitated to answer, obviously forming a standard answer for a student, Harry added giving him a sharp look. "Please, be honest. I promise I won't tell anybody."

Dumbledore relented. "Yes, I have on rare occasions used dark spells." He watched Harry closely. "Are you interested in the dark arts?"

"Of course." Harry said abruptly. "Especially recently." He glanced at the headmaster. "Does that bother you?"

"A bit." Dumbledore said. "Harry, dark magic is a lie. It gives the user a sense of power not possible and promises things it can't really do."

"My mother seemed to think I would need the use of the dark magic or at least some knowledge of it." Harry said frowning in thought.

"I would have to agree with her. But there will be a time for that later." Dumbledore spoke firmly.

"Is there time? Really?" Harry stared at him skeptical. "I have so little time to catch up, to learn what I need to know." The teen slumped in the chair and rubbed his forehead.

"This is what I feared would happen, for you to feel pressured to complete the prophecy now." Dumbledore said in regret. "I know it's hard Harry but don't think of learning things specifically for defeating Voldemort. I don't think it will happen that way."

"Then how? And if you say I'll know how when it happens, I swear I'll set off a Deflagration Deluxe box of Weasleys' Wild-Fire Whiz-Bang in here on a weekly basis." Harry threatened. Dumbledore chuckled and Harry added. "I'm serious."

"I know you are." The old wizard nodded and looked around at his room. "That would be entertaining but I better not." He sighed. "I don't know how you'll defeat Voldemort, Harry. I don't think anyone can tell you."

"So the way I figure, the more I learn about Voldemort and the dark arts, the better prepared I'll be when the time comes." Harry said and Dumbledore's eyes glinted with a hope he hadn't seen there in a long time.

"Knowledge is power." Dumbledore agreed. "But here, we've become sidetracked with the real issues we should be discussing."

"Oh yeah." Harry picked up his teacup and took a sip. "Where were we?"

"Let's see." Dumbledore leaned back in his chair to consider with his teacup and a cake in his hands. "You will not be going back to the Dursleys and I'll stop using the prophecy as a bond with you." He looked at Harry who gave a nod of affirmation.

"Oh, I do have one request." Dumbledore said chewing thoughtfully on a bite of cake. He washed it down with a gulp of tea then continued. "I would like to continue our meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays." When Harry frowned he shook his head. "Not for occlumency. I want to stay connected with you. Something I should have done before."

"Will you teach me Legilimency?" Harry asked. He was touched by the headmaster's effort to patch things up between them.

"Yes, I had forgotten it was part of our bargain." Dumbledore said. "Say, one day of Legilimency and one day just to talk?" Harry smiled and nodded.

They sat in silence for several minutes before the headmaster asked quietly. "Do you remember the day after your fifth birthday?" The blue eyes dimmed as they watched Harry think.

"I remember I was sick." Harry frowned concentrating. "Oh, I was in hospital. Funny I don't remember why." He gazed curiously at the old wizard, whose face was etched with sorrow.

"You had drunk cleaning liquids." Dumbledore couldn't look Harry in the face and a tear ran out of the corner of his eye down his long crooked nose. The headmaster opened his mouth to speak again but couldn't. He cleared his throat a couple of times and managed in a whisper. "I'm so sorry Harry. To want to die so young."

"It wasn't the first or last time I ended up in the hospital for eating or drinking something I shouldn't." Harry shrugged. "I found the nurses at the hospital very nice, nicer than anyone I had ever known." He sighed. "But eventually the Dursleys got wise and started locking stuff away."

"You did it just so you could go to the hospital?" Dumbledore suddenly realized. "I thought you were trying to kill yourself."

"I did try that a couple of times." Harry nodded. "But on those occasions my aunt and uncle actually were paying attention to stop me."

"Thank Merlin for that." Dumbledore said softly.

"Which other memories did you visit?" Harry asked curiously. He didn't remember being three years old much but the beating by Dudley and his thugs was so common it almost seemed like the memory was still in his mind. "It took a few poundings by my cousin but I finally stopped trying to win any ribbons at school so Dudley couldn't nick them." He noticed Dumbledore's face grim and sad.

"Professor, as you said. You can't change the past. It's over and I did survive." Harry said gently.

"You can forgive me that completely?" Dumbledore searched Harry's eyes.

"I'll save my energy for my real grudge against Voldemort." Harry let the headmaster satisfy any of his doubts by meeting his gaze unflinching. "He's been too quiet since we rescued Remus and Snape." Harry frowned. "It makes me nervous wondering what he is up to. It can't be anything good." Harry told Dumbledore of the last time he spoke with Voldemort.

You are not responsible for who Voldemort decides kill." Dumbledore said firmly.

"That's what Mr. Weasley said. And actually Fred and George said it too." Harry sighed. "I guess I know that too but I still get flashes of guilt."

"I know all about guilt." Dumbledore sighed too. He looked questioningly at the sharp look Harry gave him.

"You should feel guilty." Harry snorted. "I was just about to get a kiss from Ginny when Professor McGonagall interrupted. Talk about bad timing." Dumbledore's face broke into a smile and he chuckled. "Between you and Ron, I'll be lucky to get a kiss in before the end of the school year at the rate I'm going."

"My apologies, Harry." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Why don't we end here, before it gets too late? Perhaps Ginny will be waiting up for your return." He smiled at Harry as they both rose from their chairs. "Far be it from me to hinder romance. Next time I'll send Fawkes. He is a bit more discreet."

"I hope so." Harry said dryly.

Dumbledore led Harry back through the wall. They emerged from the fireplace wall into the headmaster's office. When Harry opened the door to leave Dumbledore caught his arm and made him meet his eyes. "Harry, you have lightened my work load with your suggestion that Percy take the some of the potions classes. And now you have lightened my heart by forgiving me." Tears sprang to the blue eyes as they gazed into the pools of bright green. "Thank you."

Not knowing what to say, Harry patted the old wizard's hand on his arm. Suddenly Harry found Dumbledore giving him a brief hug. "For the embraces you missed growing up." Dumbledore whispered hoarsely when Harry looked stunned. "Good night Harry."

"Good night Professor." Harry nodded and went down the spiral stair case.

As Harry lay in his four poster bed, he found he had too much to think about to feel the least bit sleepy. His talk with Dumbledore had gone the way he figured it would. For some reason he didn't have it in him to remain angry with the headmaster. Or anyone he considered to be on his side. Harry frowned. Except for Snape, although he couldn't have left the hated teacher be tortured by Voldemort no matter how much they detested each other.

His brow furrowed, not liking the direction his thoughts had taken him, Harry went back to Ginny's kiss. Dumbledore had been right. Ginny had been waiting for him in the common room. Everybody else had gone to bed and Harry didn't waste time asking her why or how she had managed to clear the common room so early, especially of Ron and Hermione.

A sigh escaped him as Harry let the remembered warmth of her kiss relax his mind. But then a thought seeped in that made his eyes pop open. He had a girlfriend! Now what was he supposed to do?

Author's notes; Thanks for the reviews.

I'm little late in posting this chapter. I had a hard time finding an ending, even though I had some of it written before the previous chapter.

That darn cat, what is she up to? If you want to see a picture of Cleospy catSpider, check out my home page in my profile. She's always trying to lead me somewhere.

Ouch! Someone poked me in the eye! Now I won't be able to see to type! Blame them if I'm late on the next chapter.

Chapter 40

After a restless night's sleep, Harry finally got out of bed and dressed in the dark. Then he sat on the edge of his bed watching the clock, thinking and waiting. All night he had mulled over who he could ask about having a steady girl friend. Right away Hermione had come to mind and Harry had no doubt she would probably be happy to give him advice. But he couldn't figure a way to talk to her alone long enough to be useful. A letter to Remus would take too long. Harry even considered asking Ginny herself and even though she would like helping him, Harry felt if he figured some things out without her knowing the effort would be appreciated more.

When Harry could stand it no longer he got off his bed and pulled the scarlet curtains back on Ron's bed. Quietly he shook the red head. "Ron, wake up. I need to talk to you." Harry kept his voice low. He shook his friend again.

"What?" Ron jerked awake. "Harry? What's wrong?" He sat up startled, looking around.

"Nothing's wrong. I just need your advice." Harry sat on the edge of Ron's bed. "I asked Ginny to be my girlfriend and now I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

Ron stared at him for a moment until what Harry said had soaked into his sleep fogged brain then sputtered loudly. "If you think I'm going to tell you where you can snog my sister in private, you've gone totally around the twist."

"Ssshhh. You'll wake the others." Harry cautioned.

"Too late." Grumbled a sleepy Seamus and the curtains of his bed drew back. Harry saw Neville and Dean poke their heads out from their four posters.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake everyone." Harry said sheepishly.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world." Seamus had gotten out of bed to sit on the foot of Ron's bed. "I want to hear Weasley's wisdom on

women. Hermione can't be an easy girl to keep happy so he must be doing something right." Neville and Dean sat on their own beds watching and listening.

Ron eyed Seamus critically without a hint of embarrassment. "You're going with Susan Bones I heard." Seamus went a bit red in the face and nodded. Ron turned back to Harry. "So what do you want to know?"

"What do you do? I mean besides holding hands and sitting together." Harry words were rushed. "There's got to be something more besides snogging any chance you can get. Isn't there?"

Ron gave Harry a sharp look but nodded. "I see what you're after now. All I can say is to pay attention to her. Speak to her every time you see her." He thought carefully. "Make a point of taking your attention away from something really important just to say 'Hi' when she walks in a room."

"That makes sense." Harry nodded. "I gave her a bracelet."

"Yeah and the rest of us guys hope you aren't going to make a habit out of that." Seamus grumbled. "I can't afford stuff like that."

"She showed it to you?" Harry asked stunned.

"Are you kidding?" Dean snorted. "She showed everyone in the common room at least three times last night. Why do you think nobody was down there when you came back?"

"It isn't about giving expensive stuff." Ron interjected. "It's about noticing little things." He paused to think. "Like I noticed Hermione was running out of parchment before the holiday and made a point of getting some for her. Or I saw a list of books she was planning to get from the library so I made some excuse to leave and checked out every book on her list." Ron laughed. "Was she mad when she couldn't find any of the books in the library. But when Hermione saw them piled on a table in the common room the next night she was more than pleased with me." This time even in the darkened dorm Harry could see a slight pink tinge in Ron's cheeks.

"Luna and I pass notes in the hallways." Neville came over to Ron's bed. "Since we aren't in the same year and house, we can't spend as much time with each other as couples like Ron and Hermione."

"That's a great idea Neville." Harry beamed at the round face teen. "I'd never thought of something like that. But what do you write about?"

"Nothing big. Just everyday stuff. What we did in class, plans to get together to do something later and I guess I do say I miss her when I'm not with her." It was Neville's turn to blush.

"I do know one more thing." Ron glanced at the clock by his bed and threw off his covers. "You don't keep girls waiting. They can make you wait forever but it's better to be waiting on them than to be late." He got out of bed and hurried over to his wardrobe.

"He is so whipped." Dean smirked as he started to get dressed too.

"Maybe I am but I'd do anything to keep Hermione happy." Ron admitted.

For a moment, Harry studied the red head then asked quietly. "What do the rings mean?"

At first Harry wondered if Ron had heard him but the pink tinge on his ears gave him away. Ron fastened his robes without answering then looked seriously at Harry. "They're called promise rings."

"I've heard of that but I'm not sure what it means." Harry questioned.

"Well." Ron took a deep breath. "It's like a pre-engagement."

"Oh," Harry felt a little shocked. He hadn't realized Ron and Hermione were that serious. Then he whispered. "Do you love her?" Ron gazed at Harry and nodded. "What does it feel like?" Harry asked in a hush voice.

“Some times it feels like I’m going to throw up. But most of the time it’s like I’m walking on air.” Ron said solemnly.

An awkward moment passed then Harry put his hand on Ron’s shoulder. “I’m really happy for the two of you. I hope everything works out.”

“Thanks Harry. I think we’ll figure things out.” Ron sat down on the bed to put on his shoes. “I’ve stopped making everything a joke and Hermione’s lightened up a little.” He gave Harry an appraising glance. “You’ll always be our best friend. I know we haven’t spent much time together like we used to but...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not a girl feeling slighted.” Harry interrupted. “I understand you have to spend more time with Hermione.”

“Yeah, but there’s got to be a way to hang out together sometime.” Ron frowned as he grabbed his school bag and followed Harry to the stairs.

“Sorry, I’ve already asked Ginny to the next dance.” Harry smirked. “You can’t take me for granted and ask me as a last resort.”

“Oh you’re a riot this morning Potter.” Ron gave him a shove out into the common room.

Taking a couple of stumbling steps Harry righted himself and saw Ginny glaring at her brother. “Better be careful Weasley.” Harry hurried behind Ginny and put both hands on her shoulders. “I’ve got the baddest bat boogie hexer in all of Hogwarts here. And she’s not afraid to use them.”

“That’s good, Potter. Hide behind my little sister.” Ron smirked.

“What is going on?” Hermione frowned at what looked like a stand off.

Harry pointed at Ron and said in a mock whiny voice. “He pushed me. Prefect and all too.”

A slight smile appeared on Hermione's face, it was a rare sight to see Harry horsing around. "Well then I'll just have to put him in detention." Ron's mouth dropped open but then she added in a sultry voice and a sly look at her boyfriend. "With me."

Grinning Ron threw his arms around Hermione's neck pleading. "Please, I know I did wrong. I'll take what punishment I have coming."

"Let's hope you can reform him." Ginny rolled her eyes at her brother. "You two are in a good mood." She looked up at Harry. "I take it your talk with Dumbledore went okay?"

"Very well. I'll tell you about it over breakfast." Harry nodded put an arm around Ginny's shoulder. Hermione gave him an approving look. And the four climbed through the portrait hole and went down to the great hall.

Over bacon and eggs, Harry told most of what Dumbledore and he had talked about the night before. He left out the dark magic discussion and most of the tears.

"I'm glad you had it in your heart to forgive him." Ginny said softly to Harry only. He felt her sigh.

"There was nothing further to be gained by staying angry." Harry said reaching for his glass of pumpkin juice. Just as he took a large mouth full he spat it back out. "I don't believe it!" Harry said angrily. "How could they let him come back here?"

Ron, Hermione and Ginny followed Harry's gaze and gasped. Draco Malfoy was walking with Dumbledore to the Slytherin table. Harry felt his temper rising fast. "How could he?" Harry felt betrayed. His eyes blazed as he followed the headmaster after he left Malfoy at the Slytherin table. Dumbledore must have felt Harry's eyes on him for when he turned to make his way to his center seat the old wizard gave short shake of his head and caught Harry's stare for a brief second.

"Why would they let a known death eater come to Hogwarts?" Ron took up the indignation. "Harry?"

"I think there is something more to it than we know." Harry watched Dumbledore closely. And again the headmaster gave his head the barest of shakes. "I guess." Harry leaned back and glanced at the other three. "It's best to have an enemy in sight rather than lurking out there somewhere."

"But still." Ginny eyes flashed. "I'd rather not have him any where near me. Not unless I get to have the first hex on him."

"Dumbledore must have his reasons." Hermione said looking up at the owls swooping in for the morning post. There seemed to be more than usual. Seven landed in front of Harry and Ginny, jostling around trying to get to the person for who the letter was intended. Several more owls of all sizes and colors tried to land, stepping in the plate of kippers and knocking over a pitcher of pumpkin juice.

"What is going on?" Ginny jumped up away from the juice streaming off the edge of the table.

"They're addressed to you, Ginny." Harry said as he was finally able to read the name.

"Me?" Ginny reached for one just as Hermione spat out her juice on her morning issue of the Daily Prophet.

"This explains the owls." She started to read.

'A reliable source has given the Daily Prophet news of the first empathic witch in over a hundred years. Ginevra (Ginny) Weasley, daughter of Arthur and Molly Weasley has the gift of empathy healing not seen in the wizarding community since the witch Radella Ransford who lived on the Isle of Drear until her death in 1893. With her demise the empathic power of healing had thought to have died out. Empathy is the magical ability to heal by touch alone and our source has confirmed the healing touch of Miss Weasley. St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries is anxious to recruit Miss Weasley for help in healing difficult cases and to study her empathic abilities. Miss Weasley currently is in her fifth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.'

Ginny's face was bright red. "How could they have found out?"

"Nobody at headquarters would have told them." Hermione said irritably.

Harry felt his face become hot. "I'm sorry Ginny." He swallowed as Ron, Hermione and Ginny stared at him. "I had contact with Voldemort. It wasn't on my mind but possibly he could have gain the knowledge without me knowing. Leave it to him to cause trouble like this."

"What about Wormtail." Ron said hotly. "What if he sent word in some way?"

A relief washed over Harry. There was another person who could have done it. For all the good it did knowing it might not be him. Harry glanced at Ginny who had opened a couple of the letters. Tears stood in her eyes. He put an arm around her shoulder. "Ginny?"

"They all want me to heal someone." Ginny looked devastated. "What am I going to do?" There was a panic in her voice Harry had never heard before. He could feel her shake. To add to her distress more owls landed around the already large flock on the table.

"Miss Weasley!" Professor McGonagall was striding toward them. "Professor Dumbledore would like to see you in his office. Come along, leave the letters." She firmly took Ginny's arm and ushered her quickly away.

"Poor Ginny." Hermione said softly as she watched Ginny leave the great hall. "I can't imagine what she feels."

"I have a slight idea." Harry sighed. "We better go to transfiguration." He picked up his school bag and walked with Ron and Hermione out of the great hall.

In Transfiguration the class continued their work on conjuring. While the rest of the class had began to worked on multiple items of the same thing, Harry advanced to conjuring multiply but different items such as a china tea set. Quietly so Malfoy, who was sitting just behind them, wouldn't hear, Harry asked Hermione what classes Ginny had that morning. As he tried to write Ginny a note and do the transfiguration work at the same time. The result was a tea pot with a tea cup for a spout in a different color and pattern.

As soon as the class was finished Harry rushed out a head of Ron and Hermione saying he would see them in charms. Taking a short cut through a staircase hidden behind a tapestry Harry caught up with Ginny heading for Herbology.

"How are you doing Ginny?" Harry slipped up behind her and put an arm around her shoulders.

"I'm okay." Ginny sighed and leaned against him. "What are you doing here? A little out of your way isn't it?"

"Not to see you it isn't." Harry pulled her aside from the crowd of students. "I just wanted to give you this." He pulled his carefully folded note out of his robe and pressed it into her hand. "Read it later okay?" Harry was rewarded when a smile lit Ginny's face.

"I will." Ginny clutched it to her and blinked hard. Harry was taken aback at this sudden change of emotions. "I better get to the greenhouse. See you at lunch Harry." She squeezed his hand and hurried off.

When Harry got to charms Malfoy was sitting next to Ron. Neville sat beside the empty seat Hermione had saved for him. Slowly Harry sat down staring at Malfoy. When the blond finally turned and looked at him Harry didn't see the normal smirk but a cold unsettled gaze that he couldn't interrupt.

"How's Ginny?" Hermione asked.

"She's doing okay." Harry finally turned his attention away from Malfoy.

"It is amazing that Ginny's an empath." Neville said.

"Just don't make a big deal about it okay Neville?" Harry said quietly. "She needs all the stable friends she can get."

"I wouldn't do anything to hurt Ginny." Neville said earnestly.

"I know." Harry clapped him on the back. "Just help us deflect the ones who do without meaning to."

"I hear you." Neville nodded. "I've got your back."

"I hope you all had an enjoyable holiday." Professor Flitwick greeted the class. "Today we will start with calming charms, which are similar cheering charms but are stronger and used differently."

Everyone took a turn being the person to calm. Professor Flitwick would cast a panic or hysterical hex on a student then another would try the calming charm. When the time came for Malfoy to cast the charm, no one would volunteer to be the hysterical victim.

Trying hard to slump down in his seat, Harry kept his eyes on his books since he hadn't been hexed yet. But trying to hide behind the person in front of him never did seem to work. "Mr. Potter? I believe you haven't been a volunteer yet. If you would please come to the front." Professor Flitwick urged.

Sighing Harry met the tiny wizard's gaze. "I'm sorry Professor. I would really like to help you but my aversion to people who help Voldemort over rides my sense of duty to my professors." The room gave a collective gasp at the name of the Dark Lord.

With a tired and sad look Flitwick said. "I understand Mr. Potter. But in this case you may not know the entire story. If you please." He gestured for Harry to come up front again.

For the first time in the six years Harry had been at Hogwarts, he felt annoyed at the tiny professor. Reluctantly Harry rose from his seat

and walked to the front of the room where Flitwick could put a panic hex on him.

Giving Malfoy a cold stare Harry nodded his readiness. Keeping an eye on the blond, who stood with his wand in his hand, Harry barely heard Flitwick cast his spell. An overwhelming fear hit him and Harry jumped back in a panic. Everyone in the room seemed to be after him and he looked frantically around for a way to escape. But in the back of his mind a voice reminded him of his phoenix form and he heard clear pure tones calming his frantically pounding heart. Before Malfoy could send the calming charm at him, everyone could see Harry was no longer in any need of it.

"I say, well done Mr. Potter." Flitwick clapped. "I should have known a panic hex wouldn't work very long on you. Excellent." Flitwick called on Seamus Finnegan for Malfoy to practice the calming charm. Seamus didn't seem any more thrilled about relying on Malfoy to reverse a spell but the blond managed it on the second attempt.

"There are several charms of this sort discussed in chapters twenty and twenty one. I would like a review of each one including proper usage. To be handed in next Monday." Professor Flitwick squeaked as the bell rang.

"He's acting weirder than normal." Ron whispered after Malfoy pushed past them to get out the door.

"Before he was just an annoying obnoxious prat, but now...." Hermione picked up her heavy school bag. "He's sort of scary. I mean, knowing he's a death eater." She said so softly Harry could barely hear.

They headed down to the great hall for lunch and found Ginny already there. She grabbed Harry and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "That note was so sweet. Thank you."

"Please, I'm trying to eat here." Ron groaned rolling his eyes then he winced as Hermione poked him in the ribs and glared at him.

“How are you Ginny?” Hermione asked. “What did Dumbledore have to say?”

For a long time Ginny stared at her plate. Harry slipped his hand into hers and gave her a little squeeze. “He said I should try to ignore the letters. He knows it will be hard but there’s really nothing I can do going to school and all.” Ginny lifted her head. “St. Mungo’s does want to talk to me when I have time. Dumbledore thought it might be a good idea if I wanted to learn more about how my empathic abilities work. And if I want to pursue it as a career.”

“Wow.” Hermione was always impressed by overachieving but a glare from Harry made her get control of herself. “Are you going to?”

“I suppose. It’s going to be hard this year with O.W. Ls” Ginny sighed. “But I think I will have a talk with St. Mungo’s this weekend. Just to find out what it would be like.”

Ron stared at his little sister for a moment. “If you want Ginny, I’ll go with you.” He finally offered.

“You will?” Ginny looked relieved. “Mom and Dad were going to come but you know how it is when parents are around. You can hardly get a word in edgewise and people treat you like a little kid because they do.”

“Especially with you being the youngest Gin.” Ron nodded understanding.

“That’s sweet of you going with Ginny.” Hermione gave Ron a kiss on the cheek, causing his ears to turn pink.

“Oh I forgot I have detention with Hermione.” Ron sighed and gave a pathetic look of suffering.

“I’ll let it slide until next weekend.” Hermione laughed. “But you’ll have to do an extra hour.”

Smiling at the pair Harry tucked into his lunch. But he wished he had sat on the opposite side because in his line of view was the Slytherin

table. The Slytherin banner above the table fluttered showing the silver snake on a field of green. This reminded Harry of the old book.

“Hermione?” Harry leaned over toward her. “Did you find out anything about that Slytherin book that was in my mother’s trunk?”

“Yes and no.” Hermione sighed. “I still can’t find out if it was really written by Salazar Slytherin. There seems to be another language mixed in with the old English. I copied a sample and showed it to my ancient runes professor but he didn’t recognize it even enough to give me a direction in which to search.” Then in a hush tone she added. “But there’s a potion listed that I think is the Snake Speech Potion.” When the others gave her a puzzled look she continued. “You know, the one Hapa spoke about with human blood that enables wizards to talk to snakes.”

“Wow could you make it Hermione?” Ron asked quickly.

“No, first I can’t understand it. And what I do understand is so complex it would take a potion master to brew.” Hermione admitted reluctantly. “Besides you can’t use human blood.”

“I would love to understand what that runespoor says.” Ron said disappointedly.

“I think it might be time to show that book to Dumbledore.” Harry said quietly thinking.

“Why?” Ginny asked. “Because you two have made up?”

Harry laughed a little then soberly said. “Maybe a little and perhaps I do see it as a gesture that all is forgiven, but think about the advantages of wizards talking to serpents of any sort. Wizards on our side.” He emphasized.

“Oh!” Ginny eyes grew large. “Others could use the shield too.” She whispered and Harry nodded. Ron swallowed and took a deep breath. Hermione was digging around in her bag.

“Here Harry.” Hermione handed him the ancient book wrapped in a soft towel. “I really would like to know if it is really written by Salazar Slytherin.”

“I’ll let you know what Dumbledore says tomorrow when I meet with him.” Harry quickly put it in his bag.

The Defense Against the Dark Arts class was as tough as ever. Malahide didn’t make them run around the snow drifted grounds. Instead he ran them through the castle and up and down, what it seemed like to many, every staircase in Hogwarts.

After reviewing many of the spells of the last term, the class was split into three groups and war games ensued. Ron, Hermione and Harry were on three different teams. In the midst of dodging badly aimed spells Harry noticed Ron across the battlefield with his wand raised but only staring off to his right. He followed the gaze of the red head and grinned when he saw Hermione battling with Goyle who had been on her team. Harry snorted; Ron didn’t want to jinx his girlfriend on purpose or by accident. Taking careful aim Harry shot a mild stunning spell at Ron then turned and did the same to Hermione but gave more force to the stupefy spell he sent in Goyle’s direction.

Later in the showers Harry chided Ron for not jinxing Hermione when he had a chance. “Just wait until you have to choose between getting stunned or cursing Ginny.” Ron warned. “It won’t be so black and white.”

“Yeah but it’s just a game. Hermione would have hit you with a spell if she had the chance.” Harry pointed out as they dried off and got dressed. “She’s the type that would expect you to do your best.”

“HA!” Ron laughed sarcastically. “One day with a girlfriend and you think you know women! Take it from me. Hermione would not be impressed if I had stunned her when she was battling that thick headed Goyle. Or her fighting anybody for that matter.” He thought for a moment. “If we had made eye contact and tried to stun each

other it at the same time that would have been alright. But to blind side her likeit just isn't acceptable for a boyfriend to do."

Frowning Harry wondered if he considered things a bit too simply. "I guess I'll see you at dinner." With his mind on relationships Harry almost forgot his animagi lessons with McGonagall. He hurried to the transfiguration classroom and gave a brief knock then opened the door and went in.

Professor McGonagall was sitting behind a huge stack of scrolls at her desk when Harry walked into the classroom. "Oh, Potter. Animagi practice." She looked over the stack of parchment a bit frazzled. "I had forgotten."

"It looks like holiday homework comes back to haunt teachers." Harry said staring at the rolls of parchment.

"It always does seem like a good idea at the time." She admitted.

"If you want to skip today that's okay. I understand." Harry put out a hand to keep an avalanche of rolls from making it to the floor.

"I don't mind at all. I can grade papers while you practice the exercise my daughter suggested when I was with her over the holidays." McGonagall pulled the leaning stack of scrolls more to the middle of her desk. "She's a falcon animagi. Being another bird I thought the idea was very good."

"Your daughter?" Harry's mouth hung open.

His professor gave him a sardonic gaze. "It never ceases to amaze me how students think the staff has no lives beyond the walls of this castle."

"I never heard you speak of any children." Harry stammered.

"Actually Potter I have two daughters." McGonagall's face clouded over. "I lost my son and my husband to Death Eaters before you were even born."

"I'm sorry." Harry wondered if McGonagall was as strict of mother as she was a teacher. "What do your daughters do?"

"Gwyneth is a teacher at primary school. And Bonnie is a healer in Tibet." McGonagall told him. "As I was saying, Gwyneth said a bird animagi needs to be able to change very quickly. For instance, in case of being on the wing and a spell cast at you caused you to change back to your human form, you would need to recover quickly enough to change back to a phoenix before hitting the ground."

"That makes sense." Harry nodded wondering about the primary school McGonagall's daughter taught at. Was it a wizarding school too? He had wondered where wizard children learned to read and write before they came to Hogwarts.

"Your first practicing should, of course, be on the ground. She suggested a set of twenty rapid changes followed by resting for five minutes in your phoenix form then repeat." McGonagall explained. "You may begin."

For the first set of changes McGonagall watched Harry change back and forth from human to phoenix. When he came to the twentieth change, Harry fluttered up on a desk. McGonagall went back to her mountain of papers to grade.

When the professor finally told Harry his time was up, he gratefully returned to his human form and slid into a chair panting. "That's hard. Makes me a bit dizzy."

"You'll know you have control when it doesn't bother you anymore." McGonagall eyed him closely. "Sit for a while and get your breath back before you go." She paused. "Your adventure over the holiday pushed your abilities to your limits. Please remember just because some things seem natural the talent still needs practice to be of use."

"I know. But I couldn't let Remus die. Or leave Snape to Voldemort." Harry stared at her wondering if she disapproved.

“Of course you couldn’t.” McGonagall glanced at him sharply. “Your use of your phoenix form couldn’t have been better. I commend you for saving those men.”

“I couldn’t have done it without Professor Dumbledore.” Harry said firmly.

“Nor could he have done it without you. Don’t belittle what you have done Harry.” McGonagall’s face softened and as she continued to stare at him her eyes grew misty. “How did you ever survive...?” She whispered shaking her head.

Instantly Harry knew she had seen at least one of his memories. “Did Professor Dumbledore show you?”

“I went to his office when he was in the last one.” McGonagall swallowed hard. “I have as much curiosity as the next person.” She admitted trying to laugh but it died away quickly. “He says you have forgiven him.” Her eyes grew misty again. “I was wondering Harry, if you could forgive me too.” She wiped her eyes as Harry stared at her almost frozen with disbelief. “I knew where you were. And I could have checked on you as easily as the Headmaster. James and Lily were my friends.” Her voice broke. “I feel I have failed them as well.”

Feeling a little unsteady from his animagi practice Harry slid out of his seat to put an arm across her shoulders. “Of course I forgive you.” He knelt beside her chair and felt her shaking. It was strange seeing McGonagall like this. “I told Dumbledore I could forgive a manipulative balmy old codger of a wizard.” A glint showed through the tears in McGonagall’s eyes. “I guess I can forgive a persnickety old cat too.”

McGonagall burst out laughing and gave Harry a brief hug. She sniffed and drew out her lace handkerchief to dab at her eyes. “Thank you Harry. You are a dear.”

“So are you, Professor.” Harry smiled feeling even more tired with this unexpected display of emotions. “Thank you for your help.”

“You have only to ask Harry.” McGonagall said quietly. “Off you go. Get some rest.”

Lying in bed, Harry watched the half moon between a gap in his scarlet curtains. The first day back and so many things had happened. He was worried about Ginny. She had been very quiet at dinner and afterwards in the common room. Something inside him just wanted to wrap his arms around her and protect her from anything that could hurt her. But Harry had to snort to himself. Ginny was quite capable of protecting herself. He had told Voldemort that after the Hogsmeade attack. Trying to think of things he could do to get a smile out of her, Harry fell asleep thinking he would even have another go at his mother's trunk if it would make Ginny smile for a little bit.

Chapter 41

Herbology was cancelled the next day due to a fierce blizzard raging outside the castle. The class took the extra time to catch up on homework in the Gryffindor common room. When Ron and Hermione pulled out their potions homework Harry remembered they had a new teacher.

"So, how is Dumbledore as a teacher?" Harry asked as he got out his charms text book.

"He's loads better than Snape." Ron said then grumbled. "But he still gave us homework."

"There is a lot less tension in the room with Dumbledore teaching than when Snape is there." Hermione said. "But he's doesn't take potions lightly either. He knows some of the potions we brew could be dangerous if not done properly."

"I wonder how Percy got along on his first day." Harry flipped to chapter twenty in his charm book. "I didn't think to ask any of the first years."

"Probably not much better than Snape." Ron snorted.

"I don't know Ron." Hermione looked thoughtfully. "He seems changed. I don't think he's as confident or as arrogant as he was before."

"Maybe, I'm just glad we don't have him for potions." Ron didn't sound very convinced.

Usually the Care of Magical Creatures was held on the castle grounds too but today the sixth years filed into a large unused class room. Hagrid stood at the back of the room with his large handkerchief dabbing at his nose. At the front of the room was a willowy witch who wore sleek furry grey robes. She stood beside two crates and waited until the class took their seats.

"Good Morning. I am Madam Alice Wilch. Professor Hagrid has asked me to show you my Kneazles." There was a slight snicker from a couple boys. "Professor Hagrid unfortunately is allergic to Kneazles or he would have presented them to you himself." The woman had a melodic silky voice.

The witch bent down opened a crate and reached inside. She pulled out a small catlike creature with spotted fur. Its outside ears flicked back and forth when the girls gave an "Ah isn't it cute."

"This is Lilo. She is about three years old." The witch set the kneazle on the desk. "You'll notice the tail is more lion like than an ordinary cat." She pulled up the tail for the class to see then stroked the sleek fur. "The coat is more speckled and the ears are much larger."

"I breed kneazles and Lilo will have her first litter this summer. Kneazles can have up to eight kittens in a litter but three and four is the average. Kneazles can interbreed with cats." She told the kneazle to stay put and opened the second crate withdrawing a larger animal with striped tabby fur which look like a cat.

"This is Casey. His mother was kneazle and his father was a farm cat." The way the woman said it she definitely didn't approve of the mating. "As you can see he looks like an ordinary cat. But half kneazle cats are much smarter and still have the ability to detect suspicious characters. Some can still be relied upon to guide its owner safely home if they are lost."

Hermione's hand shot up. "How can you tell if a cat is part kneazle?"

"The two characteristics I just mentioned are the easiest way." The woman stroked the tabby and kneazle at the same time. "Some say a kneazle bred cat can communicate with other creatures more so than an ordinary cat could. But I have yet to see that proven."

"What do you mean communicate?" Harry asked before Hermione could.

"Supposedly Casey here," The witch stroked the large tabby. "Could 'talk' with a dog or perhaps an owl and have the willingness to listen."

But like I said, it has never been proven." She snorted. "How could it be?"

Slowly Harry raised his hand. "I think I've proved it." He felt a blush rise in his face as the class turned and stared at him.

"How?" Madam Wilch questioned.

"I have a runespoor that has talked to Hermione's cat and another cat in Gryffindor Tower." Harry explained then added. "Uh, I can talk to snakes so the runespoor translated what the cats said."

The woman stared at him as if she'd gone into a trance. Finally Madam Wilch said in a bit of a daze. "You're Harry Potter." Then she shook herself. "My word! How extraordinary. You really understood what the cats told the runespoor? Where on earth did you get such a creature in the first place?"

"Well that's a long story. But Hermione's cat brought a rat to my runespoor because she had asked him to and Ginny's cat...well," Harry didn't really want to say what Cleo wanted. "Cleo talked about the place she was before."

"How extraordinary." Madam Wilch repeated. "Perhaps sometime you could demonstrate this ability to the Kneazle Breeding Association?" She looked at him hopefully.

"I suppose." Harry felt his face flush again. "Trouble is the Runespoor isn't very transportable. And she doesn't like the cold."

Madam Wilch waved off these small trifles. "Not a problem. Perhaps we could come here some time....I'll speak with the headmaster." She continued to gaze at Harry for a moment longer then returned to her talk about the Kneazles.

When the class was invited to come up and meet the kneazle and kneazle bred cat, Harry went to the back of the room to talk with Hagrid. Harry asked if he remembered the kitten he had brought to his first birthday party.

"Yeah, I remember bring'ng her." Hagrid nodded his shaggy head. Then he frowned. "Lily had told me it ran away after a week." He listened closely as Harry told about the video and how Ginny thought her Cleo was the same kitten.

"Don't see how she could be." Hagrid said. "Long time 'tween then and now for a kitten to stay a kitten."

"Would you recognize her?" Harry asked then added. "I know you wouldn't be able to get close but...."

"I dunno, Harry. I didn't have her very long. And when I did I was sneeze me head off." Hagrid said doubtfully.

"Oh well, thought it was worth a try." Harry gazed to the front of the classroom. The kneazle peeked out from between two black robes and stared at Harry, making Harry feel the creature had something important to tell her owner.

At lunch Harry earned another kiss on the cheek from Ginny. He had slipped her a note between the morning classes again. She gave him another kiss for remembering to ask Hagrid about Cleo.

"I wish you had been able to follow her." Ginny said picking at her lunch.

"Me too." Harry sighed. "I probably won't get another chance until Easter."

"Why not use your phoenix form to get there?" Ron asked forgetting his manners a bit and slurping his potato soup.

"He can't." Hermione said firmly. "I mean he could legally go there but once there when he used magic to change back to Harry that would be violating the underage magic law."

"Oh," Ron grumbled. "Technicalities. That's what it's all boils down to."

"Most legal things are like that." Hermione agreed.

"Do you still have animagi practice with McGonagall this afternoon Harry?" Ron asked slowing his eating down when Hermione had given him a look.

Harry clapped his hand to his head. When he saw the concern looks from his friends Harry said. "No I'm alright; I got my days mixed up. I went yesterday. McGonagall was so swamped with homework to grade she didn't even notice I had the wrong day."

"I'm glad the teachers enjoy homework as much as we do." Ron snorted.

"I'll have to see if she wants continue today or wait until Thursday." Harry couldn't believe he had gotten the days switched.

Both Harry and his professor had a good laugh at their mistaken day. Professor McGonagall let Harry practice his quick transforming while she continued to grade papers.

When he was leaving Harry paused to ask. "Can you talk to other cats? When you are in your animagi form?"

"I wouldn't say talk." McGonagall looked thoughtful. "More so, I understand what they mean. If you can understand the difference?"

"I think I do. What about kneazle bred cats?" Harry questioned.

"They are easier to understand. And they listen a lot better than ordinary cats." McGonagall told him. "Any cat in particular you need to talk to?"

"Not really. The runespoor translates cat pretty good." Harry then told her about Madam Wilch and her wanting to a demonstration of his runespoor abilities.

"That is interesting." McGonagall smiled. "I know Madam Wilch. Mark my word. She'll bring a kneazle bred that is moody or down right nasty to test you."

"I'm not too worried. I don't think the runespoor would let a cat hurt me." Harry lifted his school bag. "Thanks for the help, Professor. Same time Thursday?" He emphasized the correct day.

"Thursday it is." McGonagall repeated the emphasis with a slight smile.

Later that evening when Harry was going to meet with Dumbledore, he saw Percy a floor below him through the banisters. Quickly Harry hurried down the flight then caught up with him. "Hey Percy. I mean Professor Weasley." Harry called.

Percy turned frowning at the use of his first name but then smiled when Harry corrected himself. "Good evening Harry."

"How is teaching potions going?" Harry asked.

"Very well." Percy said quietly. "I am finding I really enjoy teaching. I never really consider it as a career." He put a hand on Harry shoulder. "I forgot to thank you for suggesting me for the position to Professor Dumbledore."

"That's okay. He seemed like he needed some help." This wasn't the Percy Harry knew. He had expected Percy to talk about all the changes needed in the potions department or teaching at Hogwarts in general. "I better go. I have a meeting with him. See ya later. Professor."

"Thanks Harry." Percy called after him.

Dumbledore had just arrived at the door to the transfiguration room when Harry ran up. "Oh good I'm not late. Harry panted.

"I thought I would be late." Dumbledore smiled then looked at the door. "Harry, there's really no reason why we couldn't meet in a more comfortable place. Would you object to my drawing room again?"

"No." Harry felt foolish when he added almost nonchalantly. "Not at all." So the two of them walked back down to the stone gargoyle and soon sat by a roaring fire in Dumbledore's drawing room sipping tea.

"Did you wish to practice Legilimency this evening? Or talk?" Dumbledore asked.

"Actually I wanted to show you something. And ask you about it." Harry shifted in his seat and put a hand in his robes pocket. He drew out a small towel wrapped bundle. Dumbledore leaned forward in interest. Carefully Harry unwrapped the old book and handed it to him.

"This was in my mother's trunk." Harry said. "Do you think it could really be written by Salazar Slytherin?"

Disbelief showed in every line of the old wizard's face as he stared at the ancient text. "I don't know Harry. I never heard of any thing like this." Dumbledore opened the pages slowly. "Where would your mother get such a book? No pure blood Slytherin would part with it much less sell it to a muggle born Gryffindor."

"She didn't say how she got it." Harry watched Dumbledore study the pages. "Can you understand it? Hermione thought there was another language mixed in with English."

"So it would seem." Dumbledore shook his head. "I have never seen this before. I would suggest showing this to Ian Jones the ancient runes Professor."

"Hermione already took a sample to him. He didn't even have a suggestion of where to begin searching for answers." Harry sighed disappointed. "I was hoping we could figure out the Snake Speech potion that Hermione think is listed there." He pointed to the piece of paper sticking out.

Dumbledore turned to the bookmark and studied the listing. "It is a possibility." The headmaster stared at the potion then lifted his eyes to Harry's, a glint of hope shone from the blue twinkle.

"Harry would you do me a favor?" Dumbledore stared at the ancient book. "Professor Snape is still in the infirmary, would you show this to him? He might be able to decipher the text since he has spent many hours pouring over old parchment looking for forgotten potions."

Harry stared at Dumbledore as he had suddenly turned shocking pink. But the headmaster gave a pleading twist to his head. Harry closed his eyes but then a thought popped in his mind. "I'll show it to him on one condition."

Dumbledore looked disappointed. "Will every request I make of you have a condition attached to it Harry?"

"Only when Snape is involved." Harry said dryly.

"Professor Snape," Dumbledore corrected although the corners of his mouth twitched. "I'll concede the condition. Perhaps one day you will learn to..." He paused searching for his words.

"Put up with him?" Harry offered. He saw Dumbledore swallow a laugh.

"That's not how I was going to phrase it. You will learn to appreciate your differences and how they can work together instead of against each other." Dumbledore said seriously.

"In this life time?" Harry eyed him just as critically. "We'll both have to live to be as old as Griselda Marchbanks."

"What was your condition Harry?" Dumbledore asked smiling.

"This may sound strange but Ginny's cat wanted to show me something, back in the alley where she was chased by the dog." Harry said then admitted. "I tried to sneak out the last night we were at headquarters with my invisibility cloak but Moody caught me."

"So you want me to help you get what ever she has? Is that all?"
Dumbledore gave a laugh. "I thought you were going to ask for something difficult."

"I just have this feeling." Harry was suddenly serious. "Whatever she has to show me is important."

Dumbledore gazed at him reflectively. "As it so happens, Ginny and Ron will be returning to headquarters this weekend to go to St. Mungo's. We can take the port key with them."

"Great thanks Professor. We'll have to take Cleo too." Harry reminded him. "She can be difficult to catch sometimes."

"I'm sure we'll manage." Dumbledore smiled then looked almost sad. "If you could Harry speak with Professor Snape tomorrow. I think this would interest him." He tapped the book as he handed it back to Harry.

The tone in the headmaster's voice made Harry study him for a moment. "Snape doesn't want to return to teaching. Does he?"

"It has been difficult for him." Dumbledore sighed worry etched on his face. "Severus is still very weak but it is more of spirit than physically." The old wizard met Harry's eyes. "If this doesn't interest him..." Dumbledore blinked hard and his brow furrowed. "I fear for him."

The concern in Dumbledore's face made Harry feel ashamed for having put a condition on his request. "I'll talk to him after Defense Against the Dark Arts class tomorrow Professor. I promise."

"Thank you Harry. I do hope it helps him." The old wizard leaned back and sipped his tea.

"Show the book to Snape?" Ron said vehemently. "That can't be good Harry."

"Ron, Hermione already said only a potion master could make the Snake Speech Potion. I would have to show it to him eventually any way." Harry said so firmly as if he was trying to convince himself. "Besides, I rather have him weak and in bed than strong and healthy when I talk to him."

"Harry! What a terrible thing to say." Hermione admonished.

"Terrible but honest Hermione." Ron said approvingly.

"But he has been through so much. He deserves a little consideration." Hermione insisted.

"He'll get consideration when he learns to give it." Harry said hotly feeling a surge of anger rise in him toward Hermione. He glared at her. "He was tortured by Voldemort for a week. I was tortured by the Dursleys for fifteen years. Fourteen if you don't count last year because they were too afraid to do anything. But I still had to live with people who hated me."

"But what does that have to do with Snape?" Hermione asked confused.

"Did he give me one moment of consideration last year when he saw in my mind how the Dursleys treated me? And you think I should be sympathetic of him?" Harry's voice shook with anger.

"So you want to be like him?" Hermione stared at him coldly but did not return his anger. "If you really want to confound him try showing him a little kindness."

For a long moment Harry's and Ron's mouths hung open in disbelief. Ron finally snapped his jaw shut. "You are out of your mind Hermione! Barking mad!" He turned to Harry for confirmation but the anger had disappeared.

"You may have something Hermione." Harry as a slow sly grin spread across his face. "When I was angry with Dumbledore, the most infuriating thing he could do was respond to my anger in that calm

kind demeanor." An evil flash shown in the bright green eyes and Harry laughed. "I'll drive him mad being kind to him."

"That's not the reason to do it." Hermione said in exasperation when Ron started laughing. "You two are terrible." But when Ginny started giggling too Hermione had to smile and shake her head. "What am I going to do with you three?"

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The next day all through his morning classes Harry tried to imagine being nice to Snape. It proved harder than anything he had ever tried. In the past he had managed to control his anger and Harry was sure he could keep that in check but controlling his dislike of the potions teacher wasn't something he was used to doing.

When he finally found himself outside the infirmary door, Harry stood for a moment clearing his mind of anger before opening the door and entering. Glancing around he saw Snape was still in the same bed as the night he had rescued him. The man didn't even look toward the door when it had opened. So Harry studied Snape before getting the nerve up and walking to his bedside.

"Good afternoon Professor." Harry said softly. In the back of his mind he cautioned, not too bright and cheery, he'll know it's a put on. Only the thin pale lids of his eyes flickered and Snape slowly moved his dark eyes and gazed at Harry without speaking. The stare made Harry uncomfortable but he pressed on.

"Uh, if you feel up to it Professor, I have this book I would like you to look at." Harry fumbled in his robes to bring out the ancient text. "I thought you might be able to understand the writing. Or maybe could tell me if Salazar Slytherin really wrote it."

Snape's gaze became sharper but still he didn't speak but when he glanced down at the book in Harry's hand he sat up and weakly grasped his wrist trying to draw Harry closer.

"How dare you?" Snape swung his legs over the edge of the hospital bed. "You dare to steal a book from my personal library then have the nerve to ask my help to understand it!" Harry backed away from Snape's wrath and easily pulled his arm free.

Trying to control his own anger Harry said. "I didn't steal it." He took another step back as the enraged wizard got out of bed. Harry didn't fear Snape but he still felt caution in dealing with the man.

"I'll have you expelled for this Potter." Snape reached for the book but his legs shook and his knees buckled. He caught himself on the bed. For a moment Harry saw a flash of fear in the sallow face as Snape leaned heavily on the bed.

"You better lay back down." Harry said quietly.

"So you can continue to look down on me. Snape now shook as he took a step to turn around but his knees gave again and this time he didn't have the strength to hold himself up. But Snape didn't slide to the floor. Harry took his arm and hauled him up then helped the thin man into bed. Snape lay breathing hard from the effort.

"Now you'll have to listen to me." Harry gave Snape a smirk. "This book was in my mother's trunk."

"That's impossible." Snape gasped angrily.

"I've been hearing a lot of impossible and improbable things connected with my mother lately." Harry said pulling up a chair to sit down. "She didn't tell anyone she was a parselmouth."

"What?" Snape gasped in disbelief.

"I know, even Lupin could hardly believe it. But how could she have put the runespoor in the trunk without getting b it if she couldn't talk to it?"

"There are ways." Snape's breathing steadied. "So what is your reason for bothering me? I suppose you want to hear my words of

thanks and a pledge of my never ending devotion." The familiar sneer appeared when Snape turned to look at Harry.

"That sounds revolting." Harry didn't rise to the jab. "Glad to see you're feeling better, Professor."

"What do you want Potter." Snape eyed him suspiciously. "I'm very tired." Then he closed his eyes.

"I wanted your opinion on a potion I found in this book and I wanted to know if you can make it." Harry said.

"A potion?" Snape's eyes opened slightly and Harry could see interest in the dark look. "Let me see." He held out a long slender hand. With a slight reluctance Harry gave Snape the book. Almost immediately Harry regretted it as Snape gazed at the cover hatefully. "Tell me Potter where would your mother, a muggle born witch, get a book such as this?" Snape asked as he opened the ancient tome.

"I was hoping you could tell me." Harry watched Snape carefully turn the pages. "I put a marker at the page where the potion starts.

"I see." Snape took his time pursing the book. Then he finally turned to the potion. He was shaking his head and frowning. "Don't tell me you were able to read this Potter?"

"Hermione thinks it may be the potion to talk to snakes." Harry ignored Snape's jibe.

The potion master only frowned and reached for a wand on the bedside table. "Lumos." The wand tip lit and Snape held it close to the book then bent his head to read. "After a long time Snape quietly said. "She's right. It seems to be a very complex mixture." Harry saw the man's eyes glint with interest in the wand light.

"Do you think you could make it?" Harry asked.

"No." Snape glanced sharply at Harry. "The way it is written here, I can not make out all the ingredients or the instructions." He sighed and closed the book then handed it back to Harry. "My days of

making illegal potions are over Potter. The use of human blood has been outlawed for a century. Even you should know that."

"But do you think there some way to translate it?" Harry persisted.

"What would be the point Potter?" Snape leaned back and closed his eyes.

"The runespoor was guarding something in my mother's trunk." Harry hesitated. He really didn't want to tell Snape about the shield.

"Potter, Longbottom could have figured that out." Snape snorted without opening his eyes.

"The runespoor only obeys someone who can speak her language." Harry continued. "If our side had the use of what she is guarding at need, it would prevent Voldemort from getting it for sure." Harry saw Snape flinch at the sound of the Dark Lord's name. The cold dark eyes opened slightly.

"And what pray tell would be worth all this trouble?" Harry could see Snape was only pretending to be uninterested in the object. Every line in the man's body showed anticipation.

"I suppose if you make the potion you do have the right to know." Harry sighed and Snape raised an eyebrow. "The Runespoor Shield." Snape blinked.

"An item of myth and legend." Snape snorted but stopped when Harry raised an eyebrow to him.

"Be civil to me and I might show it to you." Harry countered. Then he told the potions teacher of the shielding affect it had against the stunners Mrs. Weasley and Moody had sent at the runespoor and him at Grimmauld Place. "So, do you think that is worth the trouble?"

Snape stared at Harry skeptically before putting out a hand for the book. Harry gave it back to Snape and watched him open the pages to the potion once more. After scowling over the recipe Snape muttered. "I can not believe there are two of these books. I have read

through the one in my library but like this one the mixture of what ever language is interwoven into the English, eludes my attempt to translate it. And without the proper ingredients and instructions an attempt would be a waste of time."

"I know." Harry sighed disappointed. "Hermione even copied some of the text to show to the ancient runes Professor but he didn't recognize it either."

"The man in bed continued to study the writing. "Potter?" In an almost civil tone, Snape's eyes opened wide and gazed fixedly at Harry. "Did you show this to the runespoor?"

"I never thought about it. I don't know if she can read..." Harry trailed off because of the scathing look which crossed Snape's face. "I'll take it to her and find out now." Harry took the book back and before Snape could insult him again Harry changed into his phoenix form and soaring toward the ceiling burst into a flame and was gone.

Author's Notes: As always thanks for the reviews!!

I know this chapter is a bit short and leaves off kind of abruptly but it was either post now or probably not until Tuesday the day Fan Fiction is going to be down. So you get a little taste of what's going on. I know I'm a nasty little tease.

Chapter 42

The next evening when Harry met with Dumbledore in the headmaster's quarters, the old wizard was more contented than Harry could remember seeing him in a long time.

"The potion for snake speech has given Professor Snape a purpose." Dumbledore told Harry as he poured tea.

"I'm glad Hapa could read it. Although, it's hard to keep up with her when she reads. She gets annoyed when I ask her to reread something or slow down. But a couple more sessions and I should have it all." Harry said then took a sip of tea. "Strange I couldn't read it since I speak parseltongue."

"Language changes over the passage of time." Dumbledore explained. "Even text two hundred years old is much different than today's. I expect it holds true to parseltongue too."

"I guess a thousand years would change a lot of things." Harry nodded. "Do you really think the book was written by Salazar Slytherin?"

"I'm not sure." Dumbledore considered. "Why would Salazar Slytherin need a snake speech potion? He could already speak to snakes."

"So do I but I think it would be useful to others." Harry said then suggested. "Maybe he wanted other people to be able to control the basilisk."

"An intelligent guess but we will probably never know for sure." Dumbledore said. "I do want to thank you for speaking with Professor Snape. Captivity and torture do strange things to a person's mind, though he wasn't in Voldemort clutches long the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness will linger for sometime."

Sitting with his jaw clenched Harry stared at the fire breathing rather hard. "I have said something again." Dumbledore gazed puzzled at Harry. "You had the same look at headquarters the night Severus

was found out. I don't understand Harry." Dumbledore entreated. "Please tell me what is wrong?"

Harry opened his mouth to speak but took a deep breath instead then let it out trying to dispel the anger in him. He gazed at the old wizard meeting the troubled blue eyes. "You still don't see it's the same thing I went through." Harry began slowly.

"Are you comparing Professor Snape's torture from Voldemort with you living with the Dursleys?" Dumbledore looked incredulous. "Harry, the night Voldemort returned you experienced slightly what he went through. How can you say it's the same?"

"The only difference I see." Harry spoke very slowly trying to keep his anger from rising into his explanation. "Is Snape is an adult who knowingly put himself in harms way. He made that choice himself." He swallowed hard. "I was a child with no choices and as little hope as he to get away from my captors." Still gazing firmly at Dumbledore Harry added. "I'm not trying to drag up the old argument but don't you see it is the same thing?"

"I see it as much worse." Dumbledore said softly and dropped his eyes.

"I was angry back in the kitchen because you were so quick to feel horror of what Snape was going through but all you could say to me was you knew I had a difficult time with the Dursley." Harry finished. He saw a tear roll down into Dumbledore's silvery beard.

"I don't know what to say Harry." The old wizard finally spoke.

"You don't have to say anything." Harry said before Dumbledore could apologize again. "You needed an explanation. That's what we are meeting for, right? To clear up some things?"

"Yes," Dumbledore sighed. "And it seems, to remind me how many mistakes I have made concerning you."

"I think when you get to be your age; if you've only made a couple huge mistakes here and there you're doing okay." He tried to sooth

the old wizard. "If you were infallible, nobody could stand you no matter how polite you are." Harry gave a good natured smirk to the headmaster.

With a sigh, Dumbledore chuckled and nodded his acceptance of Harry's forgiveness again. "I've arranged for a port key to take us to headquarters in the morning on Saturday. We can walk to the alley from there."

"Moody won't be happy." Harry warned.

"Alastor has an important task to attend to Saturday." Dumbledore said slyly. "I made sure he would be away for the day to avoid any arguments."

"Good idea." Harry laughed. Then his face fell sober. "I've been meaning to ask you about Malfoy." Dumbledore gazed at Harry from over the rim of his teacup. "Why?"

"Did I let him return?" Dumbledore lowered his cup. "A couple reasons, I would rather know where he was, one less death eater on the street so to speak." The old wizard sighed. "It is my hope, albeit a small one, that Draco Malfoy is not completely lost to us." Harry snorted and Dumbledore nodded sadly. "I know. My optimism is probably misplaced. But sometimes you have to hope in the face of seemingly no chance of success."

"I'll let you worry about him." Harry found it strange at this moment he didn't care one way or the other about Malfoy being back at Hogwarts.

"Oh, I am concerned. And I want to caution you and your friends to make no causal comments he may over hear." Dumbledore said seriously.

"About what?" Harry asked. "Not that we talk around him anyway."

"Even so, information which seems insignificant to you could be something Voldemort could use to his advantage." Dumbledore warned again.

"We'll be careful." Harry assured him. "Hermione said he seemed different, scarier than before."

"He has seen things." Dumbledore said softly. "And felt the power of the dark arts."

"You said the dark arts were a lie." Harry gazed at the headmaster.

"Yes, a powerful lie never the less." Dumbledore nodded. "Powerful enough to lure the unsuspecting into its trap."

"What about the ones who know it is a trap?" Harry asked considering many things as he studied the bottom of his teacup.

"I fear for them most of all." Dumbledore said even softer. Harry looked over and the old wizard stared back with apprehension in every line of his face.

"I suppose you mean me?" Harry smiled slightly and eyed him for a moment but Dumbledore didn't even nod. "The only interest I have in the dark arts is how it will help me to defeat Voldemort." When the headmaster still gazed at him Harry added seriously. "To Defeat Voldemort not replace him."

Saturday morning Cleo seemed as anxious to take the port key as any one and made no attempt to hide. The mode of travel did not seem to upset the kitten and the five of them arrived safely at number twelve Grimmauld Place. Ginny and Ron set off with Tonks to St. Mungo's right away. Then Harry and Dumbledore left the house for the alley shortly after the headmaster and Harry had a word with Remus.

Harry tried not to stare too much at the old wizard walking beside him. He had never seen Dumbledore in muggle clothes and even though the headmaster wore a winter coat with casual jacket and pants that matched the look didn't suit him.

When they arrived at the alley where Cleo had been found, she squirmed out of Harry's arms and bounded through the snow with her tail high down the narrow street. She gave a peek back and meowed.

With a nod, Harry and Dumbledore followed the small cat down the alley. Evidently there was not much traffic on the back street because their feet sank into deep snow not packed down by cars nor were there any piles of snow from the plows.

Near the other end of the alley Cleo stopped and started pawing in the snow. "Is this the place?" Harry asked and started digging in the snow with his hands until he came to a layer of ice. A tap on his shoulder from Dumbledore made Harry move a way from the hole he had made in the snow.

Giving a quick look around Dumbledore flicked his wand at the area and the snow and ice vanished in an instance. Underneath the snow was a sewer grate. Cleo leaped onto it and reached a paw in as far as she could then she gave a cry of frustration.

Harry and Dumbledore knelt over the iron grill to see what the kitten was trying to get. Not much could be seen in the dark hole. "Lumos." Dumbledore said as he slipped his wand between the grids. Squinting into the sewer Harry had his nose against the iron when he saw a glint of gold in the wand light. "There!" He pointed. "By the pile of leaves over there."

Dumbledore leaned in closer and whispered. "Acio." A small gold chain with something glittering on the end flew up but the shiny glass phial caught in the grate.

Quickly Harry caught the chain and eased the phial through the small opening. Cleo meowed loudly and rubbed against his legs. "This must be it." Harry said as he stood up with Dumbledore. "What is it?" he asked and was startled to see a stern frown on the headmaster's face. "What?"

The old wizard put a hand out and cupped the shimmering crystal vial as Harry held the chain. "Do you know what it is?" Harry prodded. The uneasy look Dumbledore gave him made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

"It is..." Dumbledore shook his head in disbelief. "A kind of time turner but this does not send a person back in time. Instead it sends a

person...or creature." Dumbledore gestured to Cleo sitting primly on the grate. "Forward in time."

"What?" Harry gasped. "So Cleo could be the kitten from my first birthday party?" Harry quickly told Dumbledore about Hagrid bring the kitten and how Ginny was convinced that Cleo was the same cat.

"I see no other explanation." Dumbledore nodded.

"Why would my mother send a kitten into the future?" Harry was finding out the more he investigated matters the more questions appeared.

"The question in my mind is; how did Lily get the time leaper? Going forward in time is very dangerous and the ministry only permits those working in the department of mysteries in the study of time division to even attempt it. And only for a couple of hours forward at the most." Dumbledore said distractedly then he glanced around remember they were down an alley of a questionable neighborhood.

"Let's go back to headquarters and talk there." Dumbledore lead they way back up the alley. Picking up Cleo, Harry quickly feel into step with the tall wizard's strides. Clearly Dumbledore was as puzzled by his mother's actions as he was.

Back in the warm kitchen of number twelve Grimmauld Place, Dumbledore changed out of his muggle clothes with a wave of his wand. For a long time he sat examining the phial. The crystal glass had a milky iridescent quality and inside was liquid or perhaps fine sand. It was hard to tell. The gold chain had clearly been around Cleo's neck and had broken, perhaps getting caught in the sewage grate.

"This is very old." The old wizard commented. "This is an unusual time leaper. They are generally similar to a sundial not this cylindrical shape." Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Granger were oddly silent as they watched the headmaster study the time leaper. "I would appreciate if you would both keep this to yourselves." Dumbledore gave the women a gentle glance.

"Of course." Mrs. Weasley said.

"There wouldn't be anyone I could tell." Mrs. Granger said.

"Not even to discuss this between the two of you." Dumbledore said.
"A chance word overheard...I do not want the Order to know about this."

"But Albus?" Mrs. Weasley looked shocked.

"Until we know more Molly. This is not a happening of random events." Dumbledore insisted. "Can't you see that?"

"My mom knew I would be in that alley on a specific day at a specific time." Harry considered.

"Exactly, which leads to even more questions concerning this." Dumbledore held up the phial.

"I won't say a word. Not even to Arthur." Mrs. Weasley promised.

"That would be asking way too much of you." Dumbledore smiled.
"You may tell your husbands but they must understand the need for silence in this matter."

Ginny and Ron returned from St. Mungo's in the late afternoon. Dumbledore had cautioned Harry about telling them about the time leaper but Harry was adamant. "I have to tell them. They'll know I'm lying if I tell them we found nothing." Harry did wait until they were back in the Gryffindor common room alone in the corner with Hermione before telling the three what Cleo had shown them.

"Did you keep it or does Dumbledore have it?" Ron asked very quietly.

"I have it." Harry said equally soft. "He said it was clearly meant for me so I better have it when the time comes to use it."

"What ever that means." Ron snorted.

"No, when ever." Hermione corrected firmly. "But why would anyone send a kitten into the future?"

"That's what I wondered." Harry sighed. "There must be some reason we haven't found yet."

"And when we do find out why there will probably be another fifty questions attached to it." Ron sighed.

Harry nodded and cleared his throat. "So, Ginny you said St. Mungo's was really nice to you but not much more. Tell us about it." Harry urged. He had been watching Ginny sitting very still and very distracted, not really paying attention to what was being said. She was way too quiet for his liking.

"There's not much to tell." Ginny shrugged.

"Are you mad?" Ron gazed at her in disbelief. "They treated her like bloody royalty."

"Oh, Ron," Ginny blushed but didn't smile.

"I swear, they wrote down every hum and haw Ginny uttered." Ron told them. "Every nurse wanted to touch her as if her powers would rub off or something." He frowned. "One got a little carried away and tried to yank a bit of hair from her head."

"But what did you find out about the training and research program?" Hermione asked.

"Well, it does seem interesting. I told them I have O. W. Ls this year and I'm a prefect and with quidditch there wouldn't be a lot of time until summer for me to even start anything." Ginny said thoughtfully. "But they still want me to return any weekend I have free. It didn't matter if I only had an hour to spend with them the healers wanted me to come back."

"Told you bloody royalty." Ron snorted. "Actually they were pretty nice about not putting too much pressure on her." He admitted.

"That's good." Harry had been watching Ginny. "What are you going to do?" She still seemed very distant.

"I don't know." Ginny sighed. "Think about it I guess." Harry saw Hermione biting her lip to keep from giving her opinion. "I think I will go next weekend, if the weather is too bad for quidditch practice. Just to see what it's like." She yawned and stretched but Harry could tell she wasn't the least bit sleepy. "I think I'll go to bed early." She got up and Harry followed her to the bottom of the stairs leading up to the girls' dorm.

"Ginny?" Harry caught her hand and put a finger on her lips to keep her from saying anything. "No listen. I know what you are going through." This statement made Ginny's brown eyes flash but Harry wasn't daunted. "You're the same person you were before this came out but now that everyone knows, they expect so many great and wonderful things from you." Ginny gave a little nod as if she couldn't believe he knew what she was going through. "The thing is Ginny, the people that matter are the people who care about you and treat you like they always did." He smiled gently and made her look at him. "I know I'm just a seeker but I bet I could find a few beaters for you, if you need them, even I could do it in a pinch." Harry's smile widened. "Even Ron would jump on a blast-ended skrewt to be on your side."

"I think I would like to see that." Ginny gave a laugh. "Thanks Harry. You really hit in on the nose about how I feel." Her smile disappeared. Harry put his arms around her and she wrapped her arms around his waist. He just let her lean on him and felt her sigh a couple of times. "Thanks I needed a hug. But I think I need to do some thinking." Ginny slowly pulled away from him and kissed his lips lightly. "Good night Harry."

"Goodnight Ginny. Remember, just be yourself." Harry said as she started up the stairs.

Turning back, Ginny's brow wrinkled in thought. "Who ever that is." She turned and climbed out of Harry's sight, leaving him with the urge to rush after to hold her and protect her from own doubts.

"No Potter that can not be right!" Snape snapped flapping a page of parchment in the air. "And what does this mean? Your hand writing is atrocious."

Rubbing his forehead and trying to stay calm Harry translated his script for the irritable potions master. It was Sunday and Snape's first day out of the hospital wing. While most people would be happy being let out of the infirmary Snape seemed even more unpleasant as if he was trying to make up for lost time.

In a fit of frustration, not satisfied with Harry's interpretation, Snape snatched the parchment out of Harry's hand and ripped it to shreds. "Why did you do that?" Harry seethed. He had spent three evenings painstakingly writing down the potion while Hapa read it to him.

"Because it was rubbish Potter." Snape fired back.

"I wrote it down word for word as Hapa read it." Harry felt his temper begin to boil. "Now I'm going to have to do it all over again."

"There isn't a book in the world that can translate your scribbles and even though I have had five years of experience this is too important to rely on guess work." Snape sneered as Harry glared at him. "I want you to bring the runespoor down here." He pointed to the floor of his quarters. "She can read, you can tell me, I in turn can write it down. I'll be able to ask intelligent questions at the same time."

"It's too cold in here." Harry said angrily but relieved. He had been afraid Snape was giving up.

"I will remedy that." With a wave of his wand a fire blazed in the large hearth. "By the time you get back with the runespoor it will be quite warm in here." Snape told him.

"You mean now?" Harry flinched at the cold stare. He had already spent the afternoon with the foul tempered man. It would take forever to relay what the runespoor read with Snape interrupting all the time with questions. "What about dinner?"

"I'll have something brought in while you are gone." Snape conceded. "Go and don't forget to bring the book."

In a flash of fire Harry was next to the portrait hole and he gave the password to the Fat Lady. Even though the whole school knew he was a phoenix animagi, Harry didn't like startling the other students by bursting into the common room nor did he think the runespoor would be impressed if he appeared in the dorm as a phoenix.

With the runespoor wrapped around his body and draped over his shoulders, Harry started on the long decent to Snape's dungeon quarters. Dumbledore had been in high spirits on Thursday when Harry met with him. Snape's recovery of strength and spirit had cheered the headmaster immensely. Which was a good thing; Harry had to keep reminding himself.

"What took you so long?" Snape took several steps from the door to his quarters, urging Harry to hurry.

"She's heavy to carry down all those stairs." Harry said entering and carefully laid the colorful coils on the hearth rug."

"Why didn't you put her in something then lighten it?" Snape asked contemptuously, moving to his desk where he had parchment, quill and ink ready.

"She's suspicious of going into anything since the holidays. She doesn't like traveling by port key." Harry stroked the hissing heads one at a time. "I assumed you wanted a cooperative runespoor. She tends to get sulky if I force her to do something."

Standing behind his desk Snape eyed Harry now talking to the runespoor. "What are you saying to her?"

"I was telling her who you are." Harry felt a bit reckless with the protective feeling of the runespoor nearby. "And how you're my favorite teacher and all."

"If she believes that I'm not sure we can trust anything she says." Snape said dryly.

The serpent slithered across the stone floor, stopping in front of Snape's desk. All three heads rose to study the sallow face man. Harry watched Snape remain still and calm as the runespoor moved closer.

"Is there a problem Potter? Is it warm enough for her?" Snape asked quietly apparently appreciating the opportunity to examine the runespoor closer in return.

"Hapa says it's warm enough. Giza thinks it's far too cold." Harry walked over and put a hand on Giza's flat head. "Kesho hasn't said. But she never says much."

"Humans could learn from her." Snape said, still in a very calm voice.

"We have seen this man before." Giza hissed

"When?" Harry gave Snape a sharp look.

"What Potter?" Snape snapped.

"Giza said they have seen you before." Harry answered.

"I think I would remember a runespoor of such size." Snape drawled.

"He was with the woman who put us in the trunk." Hapa said.

"What?" Harry gasped. "My Mom? No!"

"Potter what are you babbling about?" Snape said sitting down at his desk.

"Hapa said she saw you with my mother." Harry gazed sternly at Snape.

"She is mistaken Potter. I would remember..." Snape gazed back annoyed.

"Unless my mother put a memory charm on you." Harry felt like he was on the verge of understanding something.

"You truly do not understand Potter." Snape sighed tiredly. "I was a death eater and a spy. I could not associate with a muggle born witch at any time. Could we get on with this potion?"

Still having a strange feeling he was on the brink of unlocking many answers Harry nodded and opened the book for Hapa to read. For over two tedious hours Harry repeated to Snape word for word what the runespoor read from the ancient book. Then Harry couldn't keep quiet any longer. "I'm so hungry. Aren't you?"

"I had forgotten about dinner." Snape admitted. Stiffly he rose from his chair and picking up his wand on the desk, he waved it at the low table by his couch. A plate of sandwiches appeared with a pitcher of pumpkin juice and two glasses. "Help yourself." Snape took a sandwich and sat at the end of the couch away from the fire.

With more apprehension than he let on, Harry poured both glasses of juice and drank one. Then after he refilled his glass he picked up a sandwich from the plate and sank on to the other end of the couch. Harry watched the fire as he took several bites of his sandwich wondering if he should say something or just be quiet. When he reached for his third sandwich Harry glanced at Snape and saw a very tired man staring at the runespoor curled like a dog on his hearthrug. The look reminded him of Remus at Christmas, weary and a bit lost.

"Why don't you want to teach anymore?" Harry asked quietly.

"It is none of your concern." Snape said without his normal snap.

"I know it isn't." Harry admitted then repeated. "Why don't you want to teach anymore?" He saw Snape blink and shrug.

"I just don't have the strength for it." The sallow face kept all emotion from showing but the dark eyes shimmered in the fire light. Harry saw him swallow hard then all of a sudden Snape clutched at his left forearm in pain.

Instinctively he reached for Snape but Harry stopped himself knowing the touch would not be wanted nor appreciated. "Does that happen often?" Harry asked sitting back.

Snape gave a short nod. "I think the Dark Lord wishes to remind me I am still connected to him." He let go of his arm and leaned back breathing deeply.

"I have only felt a tingling in my scar since..." Harry hesitated to remind Snape of his captivity and rescue. "It makes me nervous wondering what he could be up to."

"You are not the only one Potter." Snape sighed. "We should get back to work." The potion master rose and went back to his desk. Harry took a long swig of pumpkin juice and nodded he was ready to continue.

After another hour of repeating what Hapa read Harry finally reached the end of the recipe. Snape asked a couple of question then remained silent and still. "Are you through for tonight?" Harry asked rising from the floor and stretching.

"I have one more question." Snape didn't look up from the parchment in front of him. "Does the human blood have to be taken by force?" Harry swallowed hard. This was the key to whether or not they would be able to make the Snake Speech potion. Before he could ask Hapa she answered Snape's question.

"No master but it is difficult to get blood from humans without force." Hapa gave a long ssssss.

Letting out the breath he had been holding Harry shook his head to Snape. "She says no." Harry could see the potion master was clearly worn out but the interest in the potion had kept him going. "We better call it a night. Madam Pomfrey would be furious if she finds out how long we've been at this." Harry went over to the runespoor and bent down to gather her length around him.

"Will we be reading this book here tomorrow?" Hapa asked, moving her coils away from Harry. He turned and asked Snape who was still absorbed in the potion.

For a long moment he didn't answer then Snape said. "Perhaps. Yes, I might have some further questions."

"Then leave us here Master. If thou hast need of us, we will be called by the shield." Hapa said.

"She would rather stay here than be carried back and forth to Gryffindor tower." Harry told him. "Is it all right if she stays?"

Snape had finally looked up and stared at the runespoor already curling herself on the rug near the fire. "Fine. Come down here first thing tomorrow Potter. Before breakfast." Snape gave a curt nod then dropped his eyes to the parchment again.

Ron expressed his sympathies to Harry about having to spend practically a whole Sunday with Snape. But when Harry had to return Monday morning Ron declined the invitation to visit the potions master's chambers before breakfast with him. "I'm with you, really, but..." Ron searched for an excuse to use.

"Never mind." Harry let his friend off the hook. "Actually Snape wasn't too bad. Which proves how bad off he really is." With his stomach growling Harry passed the great hall and went down the stairs to Snape's dungeon quarters.

"The only problem I see is where to obtain the human blood." Snape sat at his desk the next morning and Harry wondered if he had ever moved from it during the night. "As I said the use of human blood is illegal so it will be difficult."

"Muggles give blood all the time." Harry said. "They call it a blood bank. So if a muggle loses too much blood they replace it with donated serum."

"It is a possibility." Snape nodded. "My thought is the blood may need to be fresh."

For a long moment neither spoke then Harry gathered his school bag. "I better get to breakfast. I'll come back and get the runespoor after my afternoon class." Snape gave a curt nod as Harry left but didn't look up from studying the potion.

Later in the afternoon Harry returned to the potion master's quarters. When he knocked the answering 'enter' was barely audible. Hoping he had heard right Harry opened the door and entered the room. The dim room was lit only by the fire in the hearth. Looking cautiously around Harry didn't see Snape anywhere.

"Professor?" Harry looked around the corner of the hall leading to what he assumed was the bedroom.

"Here Potter." Snape's voice was quiet and calm as Harry turned quickly around. Snape lay stretched out on the couch by the fire. On top of him, the runespoor's coils ran back and forth like a living blanket.

"Are you okay?" Harry gasped. "What are you doing?" He added to the serpent.

"Don't upset her Potter. I'm fine." Snape said softly. "I fell asleep. When I woke she was covering me."

"He was weeping in his sleep." Hapa hissed. "He needed ussss."

"Oh," Harry tried to imagine Snape feeling deep enough to cry about anything. "Please he's fine now you can get off of him."

"What did she say Potter?" Snape sat up as the runespoor slid to the floor.

"She said you were having a bad dream." Harry lied not looking at Snape. He knew the man would not be impressed with Harry knowing he cried in his sleep. "She wanted to comfort you."

"It wasn't unpleasant." Snape admitted staring at the runespoor.

"I'll get her out of your way. I need to feed her but I forgot to get some more rats from Hagrid." Harry said as he began to pick up the coils.

"No hurry. I fed her. I was surprised she accepted food from me." Snape sighed and rose and walk to his desk. He cleared his throat. "Could she stay? I may have some more questions about the potions or the book. She is refreshingly quiet." Snape said and from the look on the man's face he had surprised himself by his statement. He didn't glance at Harry but made a job of straightening the parchment on his desk.

"I suppose so." He put the question to runespoor and found she liked the irritable potions master. "She doesn't mind staying." Harry told him. "But I suppose I should check in later to see how you are getting on or if she needs anything." Snape nodded not even looking at him. Snape's manner puzzled Harry but he let it go. "I have some homework to do. How about I check in on you after dinner?"

"That would be fine Potter." Snape answered shortly.

Still confused by Snape's behavior Harry turned to leave. He had just put his hand on the door when it hit him. Snape wanted company. Harry glanced back at the potion master who was staring once more at the runespoor.

What had Dumbledore said? Captivity and torture do strange things to peoples mind. Even though Snape hadn't been in Voldemort's dungeon long, the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness would linger for sometime. Gazing at Snape Harry added to himself, and the dread of being alone and useless.

"Professor?" Harry waited until Snape turned his head to look at him and Harry took a couple steps back toward the desk. "Maybe you could teach fifth year through seventh year potions like Professor Dumbledore. Leave the dunderheads to Percy." Harry suggested thoughtfully. "It would take a load off the headmaster's shoulders." He shrugged when Snape just stared at him. "It was just a thought. I'll see you later." Harry strode back to the door and went off to Gryffindor tower.

Author's notes: Thanks for the reviews.

Did anybody notice the ancient rune's professor's name and the movie reference?

Sorry it took longer than norm to update. I had company this weekend and didn't get to write as much. I had a lot of it wrote but connecting everything takes the most time.

Things are getting complicated! I'm having a lot of trouble figuring out a major plot rabbit that has some bunnies threatening to pop up. It's making my brain hurt thinking about it. But I'll muddle through it some how.

Chapter 43

A dull throbbing ache seeped into Harry's dream. Even though the boys' dormitory was still dark, he woke with a slight groan when he opened his eyes and squinted as if a bright light had shone in them. Taking deep breaths Harry tried to push the pain away but it wasn't the pulsating twinge that bothered him. It was the feeling of satisfaction that didn't belong to him that worried Harry as he rolled out of his four poster bed.

In the dark Harry dressed quietly then tiptoed down the stairs to the Gryffindor common room. He had almost made it to the portrait hole when he froze. The glowing red embers cast an eerie light across two prone figures on the couch. Harry stifled a gasp and momentarily forgot the pain from the scar on his forehead.

The long form of Ron lay with his head propped up on the arm of the couch. Hermione was tucked in closely along his length, his arms around her. Both breathed deep and even sleeping soundly. Although fully dressed, the state of their clothes gave evidence of a heavy snogging session. Ron's red hair stood nearly on end and Hermione's normally neatly tucked blouse was completely loose and unbuttoned far enough to see a lacy bra quite clearly.

For moment Harry stood stock still, not knowing what to do. Then he realized he had to wake them before anyone else found them. Loudly he cleared his throat then said quietly to Hermione. "You're late for class."

Hermione jerked awake and looked around desperately. Ron tightened his hold on Hermione and snuggled closer to her. "What? Ron, wake up." She pushed against him trying to get up. "Harry? Stop laughing, this isn't what it seems." Hermione blushed as she tried to explain. "We were studying." She glanced around for her book bag.

"Prefects and all." Harry snorted sitting down to watch Ron wake up. The absence of Hermione's school bag made Harry realize this was a planned rendezvous.

"Ron let go of me." Hermione gave the redhead a shake.

He sighed and opened his eyes. "Where you going, Love? It isn't time for class yet." Ron touched her face gently and smiled but it faded when Harry laughed. Frowning Ron glared at Harry and still refused to let go of Hermione. "Great timing Potter."

"I could have left you for the other Prefects." Harry said. "And this is the thanks I get?"

"Well, I thank you, Harry." Hermione finally managed to disengage herself from Ron's arms. "What are you doing up so early?"

Shrugging Harry hesitated in telling them about his scar aching again. Even though he knew they would want to hear about it, Harry still felt like the messenger of bad news all the time. But with six years of being friends, Ron and Hermione knew from the shrug what was wrong. Both sat up and gazed at him seriously.

"Your scar?" Hermione asked quietly tucking in her blouse.

Harry nodded. "It's just an ache but..." He sighed. "He's feeling pleased about something. That worries me more than this." He ran his hand across his forehead.

"Are you going to Dumbledore?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. What ever has happened I think it is over. I'll see Dumbledore tonight." Harry sighed again. "I better go check on the Snape and runespoor." He got up.

"Strange she likes him." Ron snorted. "We'll see you in the great hall for breakfast?"

"Yeah. You two better go make yourselves presentable." Harry smirked then repeated as he pushed the portrait open. "Prefects and all.

The dungeons seemed colder this morning to Harry as he walked toward Snape's quarters. The wind whistled through the corridor but Harry didn't know how since there were no windows down here. His head throbbing Harry took a couple of deep breaths before knocking on the door to Snape's rooms. The door swung open and Harry saw the potions master sitting on the couch by the fire stroking the thick orange coils of the runespoor.

"Everything going alright Professor?" Harry asked glad the light wasn't bright in the room.

"Fine Potter." Snape said curtly normal.

"Do you have any questions for her?" Harry crossed to the runespoor who had turned to him, hissing.

"He is smarter than most humans." Hapa hissed. "He spoke to us once."

"No Potter I can't think of anything else we need to know about the potion." Snape said disappointedly.

"What do you mean he spoke to you?" Harry asked.

"Years ago." Hapa hissed. "He was smarter then."

"What are you talking about?" Harry rubbed his scar and grimace at a particular painful prod.

"Your scar is bothering you Potter?" Snape stated rather than asked.

"He is satisfied about something." Harry blinked as he looked at the man. "You've felt nothing?"

"Nothing different from what I've experiencing before from the dark mark." Snape stared back.

Harry shrugged, feeling strange both he and Snape had a connection to Voldemort. "Hapa said something about you talking to her before. Long ago you were smarter she said."

"I think time in your mother's trunk must have addled her brain." Snape smirked but then in an almost wistful voice. "I do wish I could speak with her." He gazed back at the serpent now being stroked by Harry.

"If you can get the Snake Speech potion made you'll have your wish." Harry said.

"The problem of muggle blood is still at the fore front Potter." Snape sighed sitting back on the couch then rising suddenly. "But while she is here..." He pointed to the runespoor. "I would like to translate the whole book."

"Why?" Harry felt his stomach lurch. "We have the potion."

"True but the opportunity is too good to pass up." Snape went to the desk where the old book lay. "'I wish I could retrieve my copy just to see if they are the same.'" He said as he picked up the book and ran a long pale hand over the cover.

"Why can't you get your book?" Harry asked. Snape gazed at him with the contempt Harry knew so well.

"Even you should know my ancestral home is being watched by the Dark Lords followers." Snape said dryly. "While it would take a full force assault to breach the protective spells on the castle if I would return the Dark Lord would risk it."

"Perhaps Professor Dumbledore...?" Harry started.

"The headmaster is busy with other matters Potter. Retrieving the book is not high on his list of things that need to be done." Snape snapped.

"I suppose not." Harry nodded.

"Well?" Snape stared at him coldly.

"Well what?" Harry frowned. "Oh the book." He sighed. "I guess I could once a week for a couple of hours." Harry trailed off with a sharp look from Snape.

"Three days a week or it will take forever Potter?" Snape drawled.

"Two. I have meetings with the Headmaster and quidditch practice to fit in." Harry countered. He rubbed his forehead thinking the pain must have finally driven him insane, agreeing to meet with Snape, again.

"Fine." Snape nodded as if dismissing him. "Tomorrow then after dinner."

"Fine." Harry echoed and strode to the door and left without another word.

"You are mental aren't you?" Ron blurted out when Harry told them about helping translate the Slytherin book with Snape.

"I'm beginning to think so too." Harry sighed pushing at the scrambled eggs on his plate.

"You drop potions so you don't have to put up with his rubbish and now you agree to help him again." Ron shook his head.

"Ron, it is a great opportunity." Hermione said.

"But why does it have to be Snape?" Ginny asked. "We could help Harry write it all down. It would save him the trouble of Snape."

"I wished I would have thought of that before agreeing to help Snape." Harry sighed. "What's done is done. But if he gives me any flack I'll quit." He vowed.

"That sounds better." Ron gave a nod of approval. "He's bound to say something stupid."

Just then the post owls flew in and they all looked up. Several dozen landed around Ginny. Harry and Ron helped her gather and sort the

letters, only saving the ones from her parents or brothers to read. But Ginny hesitated throwing the rest in the fire. "What if someone really needs help?"

"There's always going to be someone who needs help." Harry said gently. "You're fifteen, in school and need a lot more training before you can help anyone. Right?" He prodded.

"I suppose." Ginny sighed then gave him a slight smile and leaned against him. "Keep reminding me of that, will you?"

"Anytime." Harry smiled then they all looked at Hermione when she gasped.

A skull, with a snake protruding through its mouth, hovered above a small house in a black and white picture on the front page of The Daily Prophet in front of her. The headline read. Dark Mark Marks Death Again.

Quietly Hermione read the article aloud.

'The fear of the wizarding world is realized again. The Dark Mark appeared early this morning over a house in Coventry. The Dark Mark is made by You Know Who and his followers after a killing. Leonard Fudge was found dead in his drawing room along with his wife Anna. Fudge is a third cousin of Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge. Leonard Fudge married Anna Betts a muggle born witch in 1927. They are survived by a daughter Isabelle and two sons Jack and John living in London.

Ministry has yet to release any information as to why the couple was chosen. A Ministry spokes wizard ask the magical community to remain calm and vigilant.'

A knot twisted in Harry stomach and his mouth went dry. No one spoke after Hermione had finished reading. With concerned faces they all looked around the great hall to see if other students were reading about the dark mark. The hall was as normal as any day. Automatically Harry looked to the teachers' table. Dumbledore met his eyes for a brief moment. The sadness in the old face made

Harry's stomach tighten even more. McGonagall's face was set grim and white. Professor's Sprout's cheery smile was gone, replaced by a haunted stony stare as she pushed the food around on her plate. Tiny Professor Flitwick had his face in his hands and looked like he was shaking. At the end of the table Hagrid sat gazing confidently thoughtful at Dumbledore.

"We better get to class." Hermione whispered. She was blinking back tears.

"Herbology is cancelled again." Ron said stiffly as he put an arm around her. "Let's go up to the common room." He suggested.

"I have to go to transfiguration." Ginny sniffed as she rose from her seat.

"I'll walk you to class." Harry offered as he got up and put his arm around her.

"Thanks Harry." Ginny leaned into him and put her arm around his waist. They walked out of the hall. "Why isn't anyone else upset? Like the teachers?"

"The Professors remember how it was." Harry said quietly. "Only a few students have been directly affected by Voldemort. No student here remembers and even if they have grown up hearing stories of the dark mark, it just a story, no real lives are connected to it."

"When Dad told us about the Dark Mark at the Quidditch World Cup," Ginny shivered. "I was so afraid. I never had heard him sound like that before, so scared and worried."

Harry squeezed her shoulders. "I remember." He didn't know what else to say. When they stopped in front of the transfiguration class room he pulled her aside. "Try not to worry to much okay Ginny?" Harry gazed down at her brown eyes.

"You too." Ginny gave him a weak smile and kissed his cheek then turned and went through the classroom door.

Three strides from the room Harry changed into his phoenix form and in a flash of fire appeared in the Gryffindor common room. He changed back into his human form, ignoring the stares from the other sixth years. Ron and Hermione sat near the fire and Harry joined them.

The news of the Dark Mark spread through the students of Hogwarts through out the day. Concerned whispers in the classes and in the halls reminded Harry of the Quidditch World Cup. But all the professors' anxious expressions sent a cold chill through Harry. Professor McGonagall was distant and didn't want to talk about it when Harry went for his animagus training.

"Please Potter, if you have any questions about this..." McGonagall's voice faltered. "Ask the headmaster. I just can't speak of it yet."

"I'm sorry." Harry could see she was very upset. "Do you want to skip today?"

For a moment Harry thought McGonagall was going to cancel his training today but finally she shook her head. "No, no sense in that." She sighed. "I think you should continue the quick changing exercises."

"Okay." Harry said as he set down his bag. Quickly he changed to a phoenix and back twenty times then remained in his phoenix form to rest. At first Harry flapped leisurely around the class room but saw a couple of annoyed glances from McGonagall so he landed on the ledge by the window.

He pretended to look out the window but Harry watched his professor attempt to grade papers. The look in her face was distressed and on the verge of tears at times, made Harry wonder if she knew the people that had been killed.

After his time of training had passed Harry resumed his human shape. "You seemed to be coming right along Potter." Professor McGonagall said a bit too brightly from her chair behind the desk.

"You knew them didn't you?" Harry put a hand on her shoulder. She gave a teary nod.

"They were very good friends." McGonagall swallowed. "I can't believe this is starting all over again."

"I'm sorry." Harry sighed. "I don't know what else to say."

"There's nothing more to say than that Harry." McGonagall patted his hand. "Off with you now. I've got work to do."

Harry did ask Dumbledore about the murder of the couple from Coventry. But the old wizard knew no more than what the Daily Prophet had reported and he seemed hesitant to talk of the killing almost as much as McGonagall. Almost as if to distract Harry, Dumbledore reminded him of Legilimency lesson.

"Can I look for certain memories like you did?" Harry asked a bit nervous.

"You can try. It will take some practice before you are successful in sorting through thoughts without getting caught up in the emotion of the memories you pass." Dumbledore explained.

"I know what you mean." Harry nodded remembering his last experience.

"I would compare it to skimming a book's chapter titles instead of reading each page." Dumbledore expanded further. "Go ahead and try."

Taking a deep breath Harry raised his wand and cried. "Legilimens", and looked deeply into the clear blue eyes before him.

The death of the Fudges was foremost in the headmaster's mind but Harry past it to search for older memories. A flash of Dumbledore speaking with Snape sent Harry a feeling of suspicion and distrust but he had spent too much with Snape recently to want to dwell there so he pushed away from that memory.

Harry found thoughts ran much like a river with currents branching into smaller streams each having more tributaries and different eddies that swirled and spun. He pursued one that felt both old and young at the same time. A vision of a boy, ten or so, flashed into his mind. The red head carried an arm load of firewood and a younger boy followed at a trot.

"Albus wait up!" The smaller boy cried.

"I'm sorry Aberforth." Albus turned back. "All I can think about is how much Mother needs the wood for her potion's fire." The feel of this young boy was much too old and much too serious for a ten year old.

"Why can't she magic a fire?" Aberforth asked.

"The potion needs a chestnut wood fire." Albus explained.

Is she going to die Albus?" Asked Aberforth when he caught up with his brother.

Albus stared at the smaller boy for a long moment. "Everyone dies eventually, Aberforth." He finally said and started walking again. Harry felt his heart breaking. The young Albus knew his mother was dieing but couldn't come out and say it to his little brother.

"Tell me, Albus." The little boy insisted. "I wanna know."

The taller boy stopped but didn't turn around. Harry knew he was crying. In a soft voice Albus simply said. "Soon." He started walking again this time faster.

"What are we going to do Albus?" Aberforth asked running again to keep up with his brother's longer strides. "Who is going to take care of us?"

"I will take care of us." Albus's voice was determined.

"But you just got the letter from Hogwarts. You will be going off to school." Aberforth panted as he ran.

"I will stay here and look after you." Albus told him.

"But who will look after you Albus?" Aberforth asked.

"You are asking too many questions, Aberforth. Rest assured we will be fine." Albus sounded tired for a boy of eleven.

Harry felt his thoughts flowing back to himself and the next moment he was gazing at the blue eyes but now tears glimmered in the corner of them. "You lost your mother too?" Harry blinked the tears back from his own eyes. "Did you really take care of your brother?"

"Yes. I missed my first year at Hogwarts. Then a friend of our family said he would watch Aberforth while I attended school." Albus sighed and took off his glasses and rubbed them on his robe. "They lived in a remote village. Aberforth did not thrive as well as I had hoped but they were kind to him and he had enough to eat." The headmaster put his half-moon glasses back on. "I haven't thought of that day for a long time. Why that memory?"

Harry shrugged. "I was curious about your youth I guess. I was looking for memories of Hogwarts. I must have gone back too far."

"You did quite well though. I am impressed." Dumbledore smiled at him. "There are a lot of memories to shift through in this old head." He tapped his temple.

"Professor, when the runespoor bit your father, did you go back to where she was hidden?" Harry asked.

"Yes. I wanted to kill the snake that killed my father. At the time I did not know it was a runespoor." The old man sighed. "But I was only six and did not have the courage to confront a snake of that size. Or so I found out when I returned to do away with her."

"So that's why you didn't see what she was guarding." Harry said. "I told Snape so I guess I should tell you too."

"Professor Snape." Dumbledore eyed Harry reproachfully. "Was surprised you had told him about the runespoor shield before you told me. He only mentioned it because he assumed I already knew."

"Did he explain why I think the Snake Speech potion is important?" Harry questioned.

"Yes, I agree it would be very useful." Dumbledore said carefully.

"I think it will be much more than useful." Harry said intensely. "I think it will be vital. I don't know why but I just have this feeling."

Dumbledore lifted his head to gaze at Harry keenly. "Considering your other 'feelings' have been quite accurate, I think we should find a way to make the potion then."

Harry let out the breath he had been holding. If Dumbledore wanted the potions made Harry was certain it would get done. "Human blood is the hard part. I mentioned the blood banks of muggles but Snape thought the blood should be fresh."

"Yes, we have discussed the options of obtaining the necessary ingredients." Dumbledore frowned. "And have yet come up with a viable plan."

"We'll think of something. We have to." Harry said fervently.

The headmaster once again gave Harry a concentrated gaze and gave him a little nod. "We will."

The next morning could have been a repeat of the day before along with Harry's scar waking him again and the Daily Prophet reporting another death punctuated by the appearance of the Dark Mark. And the rest of the week proved just as bad, more deaths and the Dark Mark. By the weekend Harry was worn out by the almost constant throbbing pain in his scar. The only relief he had was by turning into his animagus form or by Ginny touching his scar. But he restrained her from putting her hands on his forehead when people were around.

Harry didn't think even Gryffindors needed to witness Ginny's abilities nor did he want them to know his scar hurt almost all the time now.

With typical January weather dumping more snow on Hogwarts, Quidditch practice was cancelled again for the last weekend in the month. As tired as he was Harry was secretly glad he didn't have to fly in this weather.

Ginny spent the weekend at headquarters to go to St. Mungo's and returned early Sunday evening. Despite his questioning, Ginny wouldn't say much about what she had done at St. Mungo's. She insisted there was homework she needed to complete so Ginny went up to the girls' dormitory to study in private.

"Is Ginny okay Hermione?" Harry asked feeling a bit hurt and very confused. He wanted to comfort Ginny but she seemed to be pulling away.

"Don't worry Harry. She just has a lot to think about besides O.W.L.s." Hermione patted his arm. "I think Ginny can handle it but don't be surprise if she doesn't want to talk about it all the time."

"I thought girls discussed everything." Harry rubbed his forehead.

"Some do. Some don't. She's under a lot of pressure so if you push too much for her to talk she'll pull away." Hermione explained.

"I thought only guys did that?" Ron looked up from the parchment on which he was writing his potions essay.

Hermione gazed at Ron in a sympathetic annoyed way. "Nobody likes to be pushed into talking." She spoke slowly controlling the condescension in her voice. "I don't mean you shouldn't keep asking Harry. Just don't be demanding about it." Hermione explained further.

For that Harry was glad. At first he didn't understand Ginny's reluctance to talk but then drawing from his own experiences he started to understand. Sometimes he didn't feel like talking to Ron and Hermione about his scar hurting but when eventually he did he

felt better. Not that the scar hurt less but having an understanding and sympathetic ear just helped.

With that in mind over the next week, Harry took any private moment he had with Ginny to remind her, he was there for her if she wanted to talk. And Ginny did start telling him what she had done at St. Mungo's.

"First they wanted to do was officially confirm my empathic abilities." Ginny said. "So they had me heal a cut on a boy's arm." The pair was sitting snugly in an igloo they had half dug and half conjured out of the snow and now sat warming their hands over the fire Harry had created.

"That doesn't hurt you at all?" Harry asked.

"No." Ginny assured him almost smiling at his concern. "I feel...it's hard to describe. A tickling itchy sensation the same place the cut would be on me."

Harry grinned at her mischievously. "I get a tickly sensation when you touch me too."

Ginny's smile widened and her eyes sparkled just as playfully. "You mean if I touch you like this?" She nuzzled his neck with her winter cold face and kissed his throat. Laughing Harry drew her close to him then sighed. He looked into her brown eyes and gently touched his lips to hers. For a long time Harry and Ginny kissed and held each other close.

To Harry, the feel of Ginny running her hands across his shoulders and back was the best thing he had ever known, except when she hugged him so tightly he thought sure a rib would crack from her embrace. Or when he felt the softness of her cheek on his or her lips on his or..... The simple touch of gentleness and softness Harry had never known. He reveled in the new feelings she stirred in him until Ginny stopped his hands from wandering and he looked up breathless and guilty.

"Sorry...I didn't mean to..." Harry stammered breathing hard.

"I'm not mad at you, Harry." Ginny looked as if she was trying hard not to giggle. "I'm just setting a few boundaries." The flush on her face deepened.

"I'd never do anything you didn't want me to." Harry said the emotion in his voice conflicted with quiet way he spoke.

"I know you wouldn't." Ginny wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned her forehead against his. "I trust you completely."

At this Harry smiled. "I'm glad. I trust you too." After he said it and Ginny hugged him to her, Harry wondered if he really trusted anyone completely. There was a part of him that seemed to be on guard to keep people just a step back so they couldn't hurt him. Firmly Harry pushed the distrust aside. Nothing was going to mess up his feelings for Ginny.

Later that evening when Harry lay in bed thinking about Ginny, he wondered if she really knew how strange it felt for him to hold and to be held by someone. Growing up with the Dursleys Harry never had known such comforts. Hermione had given him a brief hug before and Mrs. Weasley had held him that night Cedric died. Being held by Ginny went much deeper than anything Harry had ever known.

The mere sensation of touching their palms together felt so intimate to Harry. Physical contact of another person not in anger or even in comfort but as a companion and friend was something Harry didn't have much experience with. Ginny hadn't seemed to notice his ineptness. Harry thought worriedly. He wondered if he should say something to her but didn't want to make her feel sorry for him. Just to make her understand he didn't know what he was doing so if he was doing it wrong she could tell him. Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. The ache in his scar had been growing since he had said goodnight to Ginny.

Tired of his scar burning as he thought about Ginny, Harry went in search of Voldemort to try to learn what the dark wizard was up to. There wasn't any resistance when Harry pushed his way into

Voldemort's mind. A pale pointed face with blond hair and grey eyes stood in front of him.

"Again to night Lucius?" Voldemort asked amused.

"Yes, my Lord. There are many that no one will miss." The blond smirked. "Or perhaps I should say the future won't miss them."

Voldemort laughed coldly. "Excellent. I would love for you to tell me your plans but Potter even now listens to what we are saying. So I can not be privy to your intentions but you have my full approval to proceed."

"Thank you my Lord." Malfoy bowed and left the dim room.

"A bit concerned about the deaths boy?" Voldemort smirked.

"You don't seem to be." Harry countered. "What's the point of all of it?"

"The point is to create as much tension and panic as I can." Voldemort said disinterested.

"But why?" Harry insisted. He flinched as Voldemort tried to enter his mind but Harry succeeded in blocking the attempt.

"I don't need a reason why, Potter." Voldemort gave another strong thrust against Harry's barriers. "I do it just because I can."

"OH that's a great reason." Harry snorted. "You know. For a powerful wizard you sure play the simpleton at times." In his mind Harry made a mental note not to call Voldemort a simpleton at any time. His scar seared with the Dark Lord's anger. "I just meant all the things you could do and you merely have your followers kill for no real reason."

"Oh you think you could do better in my position." Voldemort smirked but Harry felt a hint of uneasiness, almost fear in the words. "You want to take my place?"

"No, I don't. Sorry. That's not my plan." Harry said firmly.

"And pray tell, what is your plan?" Voldemort pressed causing Harry to groan.

"My plan is to stop you." Harry managed through the pain as Voldemort laughed. "We will see who is laughing in the end." Harry shot back and with that he pulled away from the dark mind and returned to the familiar darkness of his own bed. The drapes around the bed waved slightly from a draft in the tower. Breathing hard Harry let his mind think of his phoenix form and a peaceful sleep crept over him.

Author's notes: Thanks for the reviews!!

Sorry it's been so long but this was the hardest chapter to write. And I can see the next one will probably be just as hard. But I have some of the chapter after that written a bit...and I definitely know where it is going. That was the major hold up on this chapter. A plot bunny was so good and kept saying use me...use me!!! But I just couldn't figure out how to make it work.

Someone asked if I wanted reviews because I didn't answer them. I figure if I spent all the time answering reviews I wouldn't get much writing done. But I guess I just answered one didn't I???

Another answer to several questions on Ginny's empathic abilities; my first experience with the term empath was an old Star Trek show...the original show, with Kirk and Spock. There were two shows that had empathic healers. One show was entitled The Empath. But both 'empaths' had the ability to heal by touch the only difference I have made is Ginny doesn't feel the pain while healing as those empaths did.

Chapter 44

The next morning before anyone else was up; Harry went straight to Dumbledore about his talk with Voldemort. Ron, Hermione and Ginny were watching the doors to the great hall when Harry walked in for breakfast.

"Harry! Where were you?" Hermione chorused with Ginny.

"I got a bit worried when you weren't in your bed mate." Ron said sheepishly when Harry gave him a sharp look.

"I went to see Dumbledore about Voldemort." Harry sat down beside Ginny and felt her flinch at the sound of the name. He sighed and gazed at her gently. "When are you going to learn to say Voldemort? It's just a name he gave himself. It isn't even his real name."

"I know." Ginny tensed against him. "I have tried, in private. I just can't do it." She sounded almost disgusted with herself for her weakness.

"Keep practicing." Harry smiled slightly at her then quickly told them about speaking with Voldemort. Hermione and Ginny sat looking grim while Ron frowned and muttered something under his breath.

"What's that?" Hermione nudged him.

"I said maybe that's why Harry's mum sent the kitten." Ron said thoughtfully. He gazed at the others. "Because she wouldn't be missed."

"What do you mean she wouldn't be missed?" Ginny said hotly. "I would miss her."

"Think about it." Ron wasn't fazed by his sister's temper. "A kitten isn't likely to upset any time line."

"That is true." Hermione agreed. "You have to admit it Ginny, a kitten probably wouldn't change the course of history."

“So we know why my Mom used a kitten but we’re still not any closer to understand why she sent her forward in time.” Harry said.

“Maybe the runespoor could get more out of her.” Hermione suggested.

“Maybe, trouble is the runespoor seems quite content staying in Snape’s quarters.” Harry gritted his teeth. “And will be there for sometime while we translate that book for Snape. And he hasn’t done anything more to find the ingredients we need for the potion.” He added at a whisper

“You know Ron and I were talking about that in potions.” Hermione glanced around to see if anybody was listening.

“You really shouldn’t be talking about something like that near Malfoy.” Harry cautioned. “Remember what he hears goes right to Voldemort.”

“He wasn’t even close to us Harry.” Hermione looked offended that Harry would think she would be careless. “Anyway,” Her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper. “What about my parents? They are dentists so blood doesn’t bother them. I think they could do it themselves but maybe we could find a muggle born whose parent is a nurse to draw the blood. It would probably be easier that way.”

“Hermione!” Harry felt his heart beating fast at the thought of Snape starting the potion. “That’s a great idea.” I’ll see Snape tonight. I’ll suggest that to him. If he doesn’t like the idea I’ll try Dumbledore.” He said determinedly digging into his breakfast.

A murmur rippled through the great hall and anxiously Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny glanced around. To their surprise Snape entered the great hall and strode toward the staff table.

“Is he going to teach again?” Ron looked dismayed. “What’s Percy still doing here if he is?”

“He must be.” Hermione said watching the potion master take his seat beside McGonagall.

"He never said a word to me about returning to teach." Harry said very glad Ron didn't know he had suggested Snape teach the upper years. Harry gazed at Dumbledore. The headmaster seemed pleased with Snape's return.

"That means we will see Snape before you Harry." Hermione said. "Do you want us to ask him about my parents being donors?" Ron gasped and looked at her like she was insane. Hermione ignored him.

"If you want to, go ahead. It was your idea." Harry nodded trying not to smile at the repulsion on Ron's face. Then seriously he added. "Just make sure no one is around when you speak with him."

A flutter of wings stopped Hermione from answering. The four looked up in dread as the post owls flew into the great hall. After paying the owl a knut for the paper Hermione took a deep breath and unrolled the Daily Prophet.

Looking at the headlines Harry felt like had been hit by a bludger. His breath left him and he quickly closed his eyes wishing he couldn't hear Hermione read.

'The Dark Mark marked another death this morning. Arabella Figg was found dead along with several cats at her home on Wisteria Walk in Little Winging, Surrey. A squib, Figg was born to Thomas and Ivy Nelson in 1928. She married Donald Figg a muggle in 1948 who passed away in 1976. She had no children.'

"Why would they kill a squib?" Ron asked.

"She lived near me." Harry swallowed hard. "I used to stay at her place sometimes."

"She was in the Order." Ginny reminded him. "Remember she testified at Harry's trial last year."

"Are you okay Harry?" Hermione stared at him.

"No." Harry put his face in his hands and rubbed his eyes underneath his glasses. "Because it is only going to get worse." He looked up and gazed around the Great Hall. How soon would it be until the death of a close relative jarred the other students out of their safe world? No one here would miss a squib. Unexpected a lump rose to his throat and Harry blinked as he thought of his batty old neighbor. He felt Ginny lean against him and threaded her fingers through his.

"Harry." Ginny whispered. "Is there anything I can do?"

Harry gave her hand a squeeze and shook his head. "I didn't really know her that well. The Dursleys left me with her when they would go on holiday and on Dudley's birthday." He cleared his throat. "I never knew she was a squib until last year. Or that she knew anything about the wizarding world."

"You don't have to know someone well to mourn their passing." Hermione said quietly.

"I suppose not." Harry nodded then rubbed his forehead idly. "I wonder if any of her cats escaped." To which he really didn't expect an answer then a cold chill made Harry's eyes open wide. "What if the Death Eaters go after the Dursleys?"

"From what you've told us mate, they deserve anything they get." Ron said then he flinched as Hermione slapped his arm.

"That's a terrible thing to say." Hermione glared.

"I know what he means Hermione. I thought the same thing, at first, but I really don't want them dead." Harry shook his head. "Just out of my life forever."

Throughout the day Harry found himself thinking about Mrs. Figg more than he ever had in all the time he had known her. Certain colors would remind him of material in the drawing room of her house. A word said a particular way made him reflect on his frantic neighbor of last year when the dementors had attacked. In transfiguration he

sat staring at the tea set he had conjured trying hard to keep his emotions under control.

“Nice work Potter.” Professor McGonagall said as she examined the teapot. “This has a chip in it though. Were you thinking of a particular tea set?” Harry didn’t look at the professor but gave a slight nod and ran his finger over the familiar pattern and across the chip. McGonagall tried to catch Harry’s eyes but he still hadn’t looked up. She realized something was bothering him and left his desk to check on someone else’s progress.

When the class ended, Harry vanished the tea set and bolted from the classroom. He took refuge in the boys’ toilet, closing the stall door and leaning his forehead against it. Swallowing hard, Harry couldn’t believe he could be this broken up about Mrs. Figg’s death. Tears leaked out of his eyes and a lump came back to his throat.

“Harry?” Ron’s voice echoed quietly. “You in here?”

“Yeah?” Harry wiped his face on his robes. He would bet money Hermione had sent Ron in after him.

“What’s up?” Ron looked worried as Harry came out of the stall went to the sink and splashed water on his face. When Harry shrugged Ron eyed him unconvinced.

Harry shrugged again and let out a deep breath. “The tea set was Mrs. Figg’s.”

“Oh.” Ron said. “You alright?”

“Yeah.” Harry turned to face his friend. “Hermione send you?”

“No.” Ron frowned. “I thought I better check on you.”

“Why does her death bother me so much?” Harry leaned back against the sinks.

"Sorry that is Hermione's department. I just make sure everything is okay." Ron said sympathetically. "She can analyze you at lunch. Come on we better get to charms Harry."

At lunch Hermione did try to explain to Harry why he was feeling the way he was. "From what you've said, Harry, Mrs. Figg was the closest thing you had to someone kind and caring even if you didn't like staying there. So of course you're going to feel this way. And you spent more time with her than you probably realize."

For a long moment Harry didn't say anything. "I wish now..." He leaned his chin on his hands, his elbows on the table. "She kept asking me around for tea last summer but I was too angry at her, Dumbledore and everybody to want to talk to her."

"Oh." Hermione said softly. "So you feel guilty as well. Don't Harry." She put an arm across his shoulders. "It's not your fault. You aren't at fault for not spending time with her."

"I know." Harry sighed. "But I just keep thinking it wouldn't have hurt me to have had a cup of tea with her just once last summer."

"But you were grieving over Sirius." Hermione said. "And still are even if you don't know it."

"Oh, I know it believe me." Harry said soberly.

"Having that hurt makes you a little more sensitive to another death don't you think?" Hermione reasoned.

Harry nodded. He was getting tired of the scrutinizing of his feelings. He felt how he felt. Then Harry noticed a strange sense of something being missing. "Where's Ginny?"

"She went to the library." Ron said. "O.W.L.s year remember?"

“Oh.” Harry wasn’t really hungry. “Maybe I can take her a little something.” He quickly bundled a couple of chicken legs in a napkin and headed off to find Ginny.

The thing that took his mind off Mrs. Figg’s death was Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown coming to him after Defense against the Dark Arts class and asking him about starting up the D.A. again.

“You promised.” Lavender insisted.

“Remember?” Parvati looked hopeful.

“Yeah, I remember Parvati.” Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione. Ron had a suspicious look on his face, not unlike a guard dog. He almost glared at the two girls as they stepped closer to Harry. Hermione gave Harry an amused smile. “The thing is; with everything that has happened, you need Malahide more than ever. Can’t you see that?” Both girls looked disappointed.

“But Harry he’s so...” Parvati evidently couldn’t think of word to describe Malahide but Lavender could.

“Rude.” She finished. “Please Harry?”

“I suppose it wouldn’t be a bad idea to get together to practice.” Harry started. “So as long as you stay in Malahide’s class.”

“But we wanted to drop the class.” Parvati complained. “You’re a much better teacher Harry.”

“Thanks.” Harry smiled. “Maybe with more practice you’ll find Malahide’s class easier. But that’s the deal take it or leave it.” He said firmly.

The two girls looked at each other and nodded reluctantly. “Okay Harry, it’s a deal. Now what? Should we contact the rest of the D.A. members?” Lavender asked.

"You better wait until I discuss it with Dumbledore tomorrow night." Harry said smiling. "No need to keep it a secret this year. I don't even think Malahide would object."

"Let us know when and where then." Lavender said smiling back at Harry.

Parvati gave Harry an airy goodbye and the two girls flounced away. He caught Ron watching him watch the girls leave and Harry blushed. "I better go to the library to look up the charms homework. Ah, see you at dinner."

"He's weirder than before." Ron mumbled in Harry's ear so Hermione couldn't hear. "Snape. I better let her tell it." He quickly made a space so Hermione could sit between them at the Gryffindor table in the great hall.

Harry turned to Hermione in anticipation. "Did you ask him? About your parents?"

"Yes." Harry could feel Hermione shudder slightly. She gazed at her plate. "He was....acting rather odd."

"But what did he say?" Harry prodded. Snape acting odd didn't interest him in the least.

"At first he just stared at us like we weren't even there." Hermione said. "Then he said. It is being discussed. Just like that deadpanned, not a word more. I started to ask about it and he gave me this look." Hermione shivered again. "I really don't know how you stand being in his quarters."

"Nice of you to remind me." Harry snorted. "When I'm there this evening I'll ask him about it." He turned as Ginny came up the row between the tables and slid into the seat beside him. "Hi. Get your homework done?"

“Mostly.” Ginny sighed. “It’s only going to get worse when Quidditch practice starts up again.”

“Which reminds me. I think we’ll try to get a practice in on Wednesday.” Harry passed Ginny a plate of pork chops. “And Parvati and Lavender want me to start up the D.A. again.”

“Oh great.” Ginny said exasperated. “Like I have a second of free time.”

“It’s not required. You don’t have to come to the D.A.” Harry said gently.

“So you don’t want me to come?” Ginny now looked hurt.

“I didn’t say that.” Harry back peddled. He felt a warning nudge from Hermione. Feeling like his brain might be smoking from his furious attempt to think of the right thing to say, Harry put an arm around Ginny and said. “I want to make things easy for you. I didn’t want you to think you had to attend the D.A. meetings just because I am there.” Another nudge came from Hermione but Harry couldn’t tell if she approved of his answer.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to snap at you.” Ginny leaned against him. “I’ll probably drive you nutters between now and O..”

“That’s okay. I remember....Hermione going off the deep end.” Harry quipped.

“I did not!” Hermione spluttered. When Ginny laughed, Hermione elbowed Harry in the ribs. “Very funny.” Ron was fighting hard to keep from spitting out the bite of food he had just put in his mouth.

Harry was just glad he could make Ginny laugh. Giving Hermione a bigger smile than he had for a long time made her start laughing too. She just shook her head at him and started on her dinner.

After dinner once again Harry found himself outside Snape's quarters. Gathering his nerve Harry knocked on the door and it swung open. "Come in Potter." Snape called.

Harry entered cautiously. The potion master sat at his desk engrossed in something and didn't look up at Harry. But Hapa greeted him. "Good tidings to thee Master." She slithered over to him.

"Hi Hapa, Kesho, and to you Giza." Harry carefully spoke to each one so none felt slighted. "Do you need anything?"

"Just someone to talk to." Hapa said. Harry heard Giza hissed angrily that she was there. Hapa spat back at Giza. "Someone with more intelligence than cobra's spawn." Enraged Giza and she puffed her neck up and snapped at Hapa. Harry grabbed Giza and told her to stop trying to bite Hapa.

"Oh if I really wanted to bite her I would have." Giza hissed.

"Potter what's going on?" Snape had risen from his desk and looked on with concern.

"Just a family quarrel Professor." Harry kept a firm hold on Giza but stroke her broad flat head to soothe her. "Giza, calm down. Be nice and I'll have the cats bring you a fresh rat." This seemed to make Giza happy even though she stuck her tongue out at Hapa several times. Sighing over an argument pacified Harry glanced at the potion master, whose mouth was hanging open slightly watching the exchange. "Everything is fine Professor. Do you want to get started?"

"What? Oh, yes." He hastily sat back down at his desk. Quickly Snape put away the parchment in front of him and got a fresh roll. Harry retrieved the ancient book from the corner of Snape's desk and sat on the hearthrug with the runespoor. Carefully he opened the book and held it for Hapa to read. With a glance at Snape Harry told the runespoor to begin.

The first time Snape called a halt to the recitation asking Harry haughtily to repeat a section, Hapa hissed and refused to continue. Then Snape got angry with Harry and the runespoor wrapped her

coils around Harry as if to protect him. The runespoor loyalty to Harry caused Snape's eyes to burn with an angry sadness as Hapa glared and hissed at him. After the first incident Snape never asked Harry to repeat anything until the next session then the potion master merely told Harry where to have Hapa start.

Snape gave Harry no more information than he had Hermione and Ron about Mr. and Mrs. Granger donating the blood for the potion. But the next evening Harry spoke to Professor Dumbledore.

"It is not donating the blood that causes Mr. and Mrs. Granger to hesitate." Dumbledore said. "It is what the blood is to be used for that gives them pause."

"I don't understand." Harry felt a tenseness in being so close.

"Drinking human blood is not an acceptable behavior in many cultures." Dumbledore pointed out.

"Oh." Harry hadn't considered the repulsion of consuming human blood to factor in making the potion. "You did tell them how important this is?"

"Yes." Dumbledore nodded. "They haven't said no, Harry. They are just thinking things through. We must allow them that courtesy."

"I know." Harry sighed.

"I know it is hard for young people to be patient but some things only come in the course of due time." Dumbledore reminded him.

Harry eyed the headmaster critically then said "Yeah but I don't have to like it."

Dumbledore smiled slightly. "No not at all, but a wise person puts to use the time one has to wait." He conjured a tea service which seemed to have become a normal thing to do during Harry and Dumbledore's talks. The steaming teapot made Harry think of Mrs. Figg again.

"Mrs. Figg. Why her?" Harry felt sad and guilty again.

"If you mean if there is a pattern to these killings I can answer that." Dumbledore sighed and sat down his teacup. "The targets seem to be older witches or wizards who marry muggles. Arabella..." Dumbledore's voice caught with emotion and he swallowed hard. "Was a new twist in Lucius Malfoy's dark mind."

"Is any of her family living?" Harry asked softly.

"No." Dumbledore said just as quietly. "She was the last of the Nelson wizarding line." Harry watched the old wizard who seemed to want to say something more but couldn't continue speaking of Mrs. Figg.

"When is her funeral?" Harry asked. With no family Harry couldn't stand the thought of no mourners for Mrs. Figg.

"Tomorrow morning." Dumbledore sighed.

"I want to go." Harry said firmly.

For a long time Dumbledore considered his request then slowly the headmaster nodded. "I will take you myself since I will be in attendance. The chance of an attack is slight. I doubt if Voldemort and his Death Eaters would expect a large turn out for a squib."

The next morning Harry and Dumbledore used a port key to take them to a wood next to the cemetery where Mrs. Figg would be laid to rest. A dull winter sun shone on the packed snow as Harry and Dumbledore walked to the burial site. Under his black cloak, Harry wore his new clothes from the summer, although the shirt seemed snugger across the chest than he remembered. Dumbledore wore a dark suit and tie with a black over coat and fedora. The headmaster nodded and spoke to a couple people already there as they approached the grave.

To Harry's surprise his aunt and uncle came puffing up the cemetery path just behind the minister. It took a short time but Harry finally

realized why they were here, to be a respectable neighbor they had to show up. If his aunt and uncle saw him they didn't acknowledge their nephew standing beside the old man with the long white beard. Strange seeing them before the end of the school year Harry thought before the minister started speaking.

The small crowd turned to attend to the sermon. Harry could see the people were mostly members of the Order of the Phoenix. He was glad they would honor Mrs. Figg by being here today. Tears started down his cheeks and Harry felt Dumbledore's arm across his shoulder. Harry was surprised but even more surprised it made him feel better. Not really listening to the minister Harry made up his own memorial in his mind from memories of his old babysitter.

Shortly the people moved forward and were putting handfuls of dirt into the grave. Silently Harry scooped up a fistful of dirt and tossed it in. "Goodbye Mrs. Figg." He whispered.

"You will be missed Arabella." Dumbledore held his hat in his hand as he dropped dirt into the grave. "Such a short service for a remarkable woman." Dumbledore put his hat back on his head. "But mere words could not adequately convey the years of person such as her."

Harry barely heard him. He was watching his Aunt Petunia pretend to throw dirt into the grave. She obviously didn't want to get her hands dirty. Then Aunt Petunia looked his way while Uncle Vernon started walking down the path. Harry met her surprise then angry look with a stony gaze. She quickly turned away and caught up with Uncle Vernon never glancing at Harry again.

"Is there a chance..." Harry closed his eyes and sighed. He and Dumbledore started walking toward the wood.

"Of what?" Dumbledore prodded.

"Can they attack the Dursleys?" Harry opened his eyes and gazed up at Dumbledore. The headmaster stared back considering him.

“At present they are protected by the same charm that protected you while you lived with them.” Dumbledore answered. Harry felt his mouth dropped open and felt his stomach drop with it.

“What happens?” Harry paused and a cold chill crept over him. “What happens if I don’t return to Privet Drive?”

“The protective spell will expire.” Dumbledore said then added. “Do not feel obligated to return to them Harry.”

“Yeah. But if they would get killed...” Harry rubbed his face with his hands. Just when he thought he was free of the Dursleys forever, Harry thought and sighed. Why did he even care? “I guess I have months to worry about that.” He finally said.

“I doubt if they would want your protection at any rate.” Dumbledore said. “Considering their aversion to magic of any sort.” The headmaster started walking again and Harry fell in step.

“Where are my parents buried?” Harry asked after they had entered the wood.

“I could take you there another time Harry but not today.” Dumbledore said gently. When Harry gazed at him the old wizard added. “I promise Harry, before the end of the school year.” Harry nodded satisfied and the two took a port key back to Hogwarts.

The next Quidditch match between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor in February after the St. Valentine’s Day dance didn’t worry Harry. Ravenclaw had beaten Hufflepuff in November and he felt the Gryffindor team was working well together. What worried Harry was himself and Ginny. The pain in his scar often caused him to pause with his eyes close, something he couldn’t do flying on a broom looking for the snitch. Reluctantly Harry had Ginny practice seeking on his Firebolt and had Seamus take her place as chaser in practice just in case.

Ginny did well seeking but Harry knew the added pressure was getting to her. She still spent several hours every weekend at St. Mungo's, coming back too late on Sunday night to talk. When Harry did get her a bit of time with her and got her to open up, she often cried on his shoulder from the stress. When Harry suggested she give up St. Mungo's until the summer. She blew up at him.

"But I like going to St. Mungo's. It's hard sometimes but I need to learn how to use my abilities." Ginny sputtered. "Would you give up Quidditch for the D.A.?" After that Harry kept his mouth closed on that subject but offered instead, any help he could to ease her school load.

The D. A. meetings had been approved laughingly by Dumbledore. So between Quidditch, the D.A., recitation for Snape and meetings with Dumbledore, Harry had no free evenings. But Harry was glad to be tired when he dropped into bed. Harry found it easier to ignore the constant pain in his scar if he was worn out.

A solemn face greeted Harry the next time he met with Dumbledore. Harry worried someone else close to him had died but to him the news was almost as bad.

"Mr. and Mrs. Granger have sent their decision." Dumbledore told Harry. "I am sorry to say they have declined to give their blood for the potion."

Harry slumped and felt a pressure on his chest. "But we need to make it. I know that." He thought hard. "What about Dean's parents? Or Seamus Finnegan's his father is a muggle." Harry said frantically.

"Harry," The sharpness in Dumbledore's voice made Harry look at him. "We can not ask other parents. Hermione's parents were conveniently placed to help if they would but we can not ask others." The old wizard shook his head with a slight warning. "This potion is still illegal. If word got out that we were brewing a potion with human blood..." Dumbledore took a breath. "It would be a disaster of monument proportions."

“So there’s no way to make it.” Harry felt defeated again.

“I did not say that.” Dumbledore said. “Although Professor Snape thinks we need fresh blood, he is willing to try to mix the potion with blood from a blood bank.”

“It’s worth a try.” Harry nodded rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“You are having trouble sleeping?” Dumbledore studied Harry closely.

“Yeah.” Harry yawned again and rubbed his scar. “For some reason this pain is different.”

“How so?” Dumbledore still looked intently at Harry.

“I can’t say it hurts more but it feels more intense.” Harry frowned trying to explain.

“Is Voldemort testing you?” Dumbledore asked sharply.

Harry found himself nodding in agreement to the question. “But not enough for me to lose control. Just checking I would say. To see if I am aware of him.”

“You must be on your guard Harry.” Dumbledore warned.

“He hasn’t gotten by me yet.” Harry shrugged then saw the worried look in the old wizard’s face. “I know Professor. Believe me I don’t want him taking control like he did last fall.” Dumbledore seemed satisfied with the sincerity of Harry’s answer with the reminder of Harry’s attack on Ron to prove he knew of the seriousness of the issue.

“I think I’ll call it a night if you don’t mind. You’ll keep me posted about the potion? I want to get some sleep if I can. Hopefully we can have another quidditch practice tomorrow if the weather holds.” He finished the tea in his cup.

“Madam Pomfrey could give you a sleeping draft.” Dumbledore said concerned.

"If it continues I'll see her." Harry stood up. "I can turn into my phoenix to sleep." Harry smiled slightly. "But I always wake up as myself."

"Your phoenix form is still you Harry." Dumbledore reminded him firmly. "Do not ever forget that."

"I do know that but I still separate my two forms." Harry said thoughtfully.

"Which indicates that you still need animagus practice." Dumbledore said firmly.

"I won't argue with that." Harry snorted as they return to Dumbledore's office through the fireplace. "Goodnight Professor." Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and it gave him a squeeze.

"Goodnight Harry." Dumbledore returned with a smile.

A week before St. Valentine's Day a rumor ran through Hogwarts making many third years through seventh years worry about the dance being cancelled because of the murders still being committed by the Death Eaters. The Monday before the dance Dumbledore assured the students at breakfast the party would go on.

Harry was glad. The dance would be his first chance in a long time to be with Ginny for more than a short hour with her mind half on homework rather than him. Since the snow had melted Harry wanted to find a place to go after the dance.

Studying the marauders' map Harry realized they could use the caved in tunnel since he didn't want to go to Hogsmeade. He and Ginny just need a place for privacy. After practicing different conjured furnishings Harry was satisfied the tunnel would be warm and cozy enough to make Valentines special for Ginny.

On Saturday Harry felt like he should have stayed with divination. Everything went exactly as he had planned. At the dance he claimed

Ginny for every dance not wanting to give up his time with her to anyone. Their rendezvous in the tunnel room Harry had created delighted Ginny into tears. The couch before the gently burning fire gave Harry a place to kiss her tears away and Ginny showed her gratitude in turn as they breathed in the scent of the dozens of red roses standing in every corner of the alcove while they kissed.

Turning over restlessly in his bed, Harry automatically rubbed his forehead to ease the ache which had grown steadily in intensity since Harry had said goodnight to Ginny after making out in the tunnel room until three in the morning. When he couldn't stand the pain any longer, Harry slipped out of bed and went down the stairs to the common room. Then Harry changed into his phoenix form and fluttered over to perch by the window.

Gazing out over the castle grounds lit by a bright half moon Harry saw clearly all the movement in the forbidden forest. There seemed to be a large disturbance in the trees to the right of Hagrid's cabin. Probably Grawp Harry thought as he watched birds fly up and several deer leaping through the gaps in the forest canopy

Then Harry's keen phoenix sight caught a flash of white in the far distance forest. He focused both eyes on the bright point and saw a unicorn trotting into a small glade followed by a several other unicorn. Never had Harry seen so many unicorns in one place. So brightly did their coats shine it appeared the moon was reflecting off of a pool of water.

Forgetting entirely pain which had driven him down to the common room, Harry watched with rapt attention as the unicorns circled around the clearing. Dashing and darting in a kind of dance or ritual ceremony. The first unicorn stopped in the center and the others cantered around him. Harry focused harder on the magnificent creature in the middle. His long silvery white mane fluttered as he tossed his horn head.

Even in the long distance from the forest to the Gryffindor common room Harry felt the strength and power in the proud leader. He knew this one was the leader even before the others knelt in a circle around him from the ancient look in the creature's eyes. Then the unicorn turned his beautiful head and Harry felt its gaze upon him.

The kindness and gentleness the stare emitted was nothing like Harry had ever felt. The brief moment passed and the unicorn looked away. Rearing high the leader of the unicorns plunged off into the trees his followers bolting after him.

Harry sat feeling peaceful and calmer than he had felt in a long time. He closed his eyes and dozed, glad he had a way to escape the pain and his dark dreams.

The morning light had turned the room grey when Harry suddenly awoke. Some time in his sleep Harry had transformed back into his human self. He lay shivering by the drafty common room window. Harry glanced up to see two figures entering through the portrait hole. At once Harry knew the second person to enter was Dumbledore; his white silvery beard reminded Harry of the unicorns he had seen.

Harry got to his feet, the feeling of peace and calmness had vanished. "Potter." McGonagall's voice came through the dim light. "What are you doing up?"

"I didn't want to wake anyone so I came down to change into my animagus form." Harry rubbed his scar. The ache had returned. "What's wrong?" Harry saw the graveness of the two professors faces. "What's happened?"

McGonagall's chin quivered and Dumbledore took a deep breath. "There has been another killing Harry."

"Who?" Harry asked with dread.

"Seamus Finnegan's parents." Dumbledore swallowed hard and held up his hand to stop any further questions. "We must tell Seamus." The headmaster turned and led the way up the spiral stairs that lead to the boys' dorm.

Blissfully ignorant of the news Dumbledore was about to break, the boys' light snores greeted them as they entered the tower room. Not hesitating as he crossed to Seamus's bed Harry could see every movement in the old wizard's body was filled with reluctance and a dread of the task he had to do.

The opening of the door had roused Neville and Dean. Ron merely snored louder. Harry quickly went to his friend's bed and prodded Ron awake.

"What?" Harry clamped his hand over Ron's mouth and shook his head. The next sound they heard was Seamus's painful cry.

"No!" Then the burly Irish lad broke down. McGonagall cradled him and rocked as he sobbed in her arms.

Harry saw tears running down Ron's face then realized he too was crying. Ron looked at Harry then Neville and Dean. Harry followed his gaze and both boys looked as horrified.

Slowly Seamus pulled away from McGonagall and wiped his face. "I want to see." His voice was hoarse and his jaw tight. A fire lit in his eyes as Harry saw him look to Dumbledore. "I want to go home and see what happened."

"Seamus, it's best if you didn't." McGonagall patted his shoulder but the sandy haired boy had gotten out of bed staring at Dumbledore who nodded.

"I'll wait in the common room for you to get dressed." The headmaster said gravely.

"I'll go with you Seamus." Dean said and hurried to his wardrobe without waiting to see if he had permission. Professor Dumbledore nodded and took McGonagall by the arm and led her back down the spiral stairs.

The utter silence in the room was suffocating. It was Neville who finally spoke. "Seamus if you need anything...if there's anything we

can do... let us know.” Harry and Ron echoed their approval of Neville’s offer. Seamus paused as he dressed, tears streaming down his cheeks and nodded.

After Seamus and Dean had left with Dumbledore, Harry, Ron and Neville got dressed and sat with Professor McGonagall in the common room as the sky began to lighten. The rest of the Gryffindors would have to be told but morning was soon enough. One more good night’s sleep in a safe world for them before they awoke to the nightmare the real world had to offer.

Author’s Notes: Munching hungrily on all the review cookies. Mmmmm good.

Whew! Dark and horrible times!

Chapter 45

The silence in the Gryffindor common room seemed amplified by the soft stifled sobs of Lavender and Parvati. Hermione sat on the other side of Ginny both had stunned horrified looks on their faces. Harry didn't know what to say or if he should even try. Ron quietly held Hermione's hand and they leaned against each other. Ginny clutched Harry's hand with both of hers as if afraid to let go.

Dean Thomas arrived back late in the afternoon. He wordlessly walked through the watching eyes in the common room to the boys' stairs and disappeared up them. With a glance and a nod Harry, Ron and Neville followed and cautiously entered their dorm. Dean sat on his trunk staring at his hands in his lap.

Again it was Neville who broke the awful silence. "Dean? How's Seamus?" Dean shrugged.

"You alright?" Ron asked at the three boys gathered around Dean. Again he shrugged.

Harry put a hand on Dean's shoulder. "If you don't want to talk about it we understand." Harry glanced at the Ron and Neville who nodded. "But we're here if you do. And if you need anything."

"It was terrible." Dean's voice had a strange hollow sound. "The light from the Dark Mark cast this sickly green light on their bodies. They just lay there with their eyes wide open." He faltered and cleared his throat. Harry gave his shoulder a squeeze. Dean swallowed. "I knew his parents. I spent a lot of time in the summer months at his house." Tears started down Dean's cheeks.

Ron's hand went to Dean's other shoulder and Neville put his hand on Dean's back. Dean's chest heaved a couple of times and he put his hands to his face and shook his head. Wiping his eyes Dean took a deep breath. "Dumbledore told Seamus to take as much time as he needs." Dean broke again. "Man this is hard. Seamus is staying with his aunt, his mom's sister. Dumbledore said I could stay but Seamus told me he needed some time alone."

"Do you know when the funeral will be?" Neville asked quietly.

Dean shook his head, rubbed his eyes and sighed. "I'm so tired but I doubt if I could sleep. There's too much stuff running around in my head."

"Dumbledore said Madam Pomfrey would give me a potion for sleep if I wanted one." Harry told him. "I could get it for you Dean. I don't really need it." Dean shrugged again as if making a decision was too great of an effort. "I'll be right back." Harry gave Dean a pat on the shoulder then hurried out of the room.

He only paused for five minutes to tell Hermione and Ginny what Dean had said then after climbing out of the portrait hole changed to a phoenix. He flew off to the hospital wing to find Madam Pomfrey. Harry decided to be honest with the nurse and told her the potion was for Dean.

"Of course he'll need a sleeping draft." Madam Pomfrey bustled to her office with Harry following her. "To see something like that...what was the Headmaster thinking taking those boys there?" She blustered and fumed as she handed Harry a small vial. "Tell him if he needs more tomorrow to come see me." Harry thanked her and before he reached the stairs and turned into his phoenix form and erupted in the dorm in a flash of fire.

The rumbling voices in the great hall made the ache in Harry scar throb. Many faces from the other houses peered toward the Gryffindor table. Two places were empty at the Gryffindor table on Monday morning. Dean had gone back to be with Seamus after an owl arrived before sunup with a letter from Seamus' aunt.

Harry felt Ginny lean against him. "Your scar is really bothering you, isn't it?" She tried to catch his eyes.

"Yeah." Harry squinted as a sharp pulse went through his forehead.

“Why don’t you let me help you?” Ginny asked sounding hurt.

“We can’t go around Hogwarts attached to each other.” Harry said wryly. “No matter how pleasant that sounds.”

“You better eat something Harry.” Hermione too was watching him.

“I will. Look I’m alright.” Harry said irritably. “Just don’t make big deal about this.” He picked at the eggs on his plate.

“You need relief from the pain.” Ginny insisted.

“How about tonight when I’m in bed. That’s when I really need relief.” Harry said his eyes darting to Ron who started to choke on a sausage. Hermione pounded Ron on the back and snorted at Harry’s joke.

“Very funny.” Ron glared at Harry then his face looked shocked. “Man I’m telling you, you’ve been spending way too much time with Snape. That smirk you just gave me had Snape written all over it.”

“I refuse to sit here and be insulted.” Harry said in mock offense rising from the table. “I’m going to ask McGonagall about postponing the quidditch match for at least a week or until Dean and Seamus gets back.”

“I forgot about that.” Ron said. “We’ll need both of them if you can’t be seeker.”

“I have an idea about that too.” Harry glanced down the Gryffindor table. “Just in case Seamus can’t play or doesn’t feel like playing. I’ll tell you in transfiguration.” Harry said and walked down the long Gryffindor table to some first year boys sitting together. He tapped one on the shoulder and motioned him to follow. The younger boy scrambled quickly from the bench and hurried after Harry.

“So what’s your idea for the quidditch team?” Ron said the instant he sat down beside Harry in the transfiguration classroom.

"I asked Mark Evans to come to practice. Don't laugh." Harry elbowed Ron in the ribs. "He's not bad. I've flown with him a lot on Sunday mornings and he's the nearest thing we have to a trained chaser." Harry paused and rubbed his scar. He took a couple of deep breaths before opening his eyes to see Ron and Hermione's worried faces staring at him. He went on like nothing had happened. "I'll loan Ginny my Firebolt and she can lend her broom to Mark, so the broom situation should be okay."

"I can't believe you two are worried about quidditch after what has happened." Hermione said sourly. "There are more important things you know."

"I know Hermione." Harry said as he watched Malfoy sit down two desks in front of him. "But sometimes we need a distraction from all that has happened."

"I suppose you do." Hermione nodded contritely. "I'm sorry. I just feel on edge."

"It's alright." Harry and sighed. "We all feel that way Hermione." They looked toward the front of the room where Professor McGonagall had rose from her desk and walked around to the front of it. She had a very solemn expression on her face.

"I know this is a very hard day for the Hogwarts, particularly Gryffindors." She sighed and cleared her throat. "If any of you feel the need to talk I am always available. And any one of the professors here at Hogwarts would be more than willing to listen to you." Professor McGonagall paused and rubbed her eyes under her glasses. "As the Headmaster has said we must stand together."

Most of the professors said pretty much the same thing as McGonagall that day, all except Malahide. He gave no indication anything out of the ordinary had happened and worked them as hard as usual. Harry found there were times when he was engaged in a heated duel he could block most of the pain from his scar. But as if irritated by the interruption, the ache would return with renewed strength.

At quidditch practice Harry didn't feel comfortable or safe in the air so shortly into the drills he had Ginny take over for seeker. Mark Evans nervously pushed off the ground with Ginny's broom to take her place as chaser. Harry conjured a magical megaphone and coached from the ground. To the older players' surprise first year Mark Evans could keep up with them. In the locker room the younger boy received many pats on the back and 'Good show Evans' from his team mates. Harry sighed in relief, one problem solved.

"Evans isn't bad." Ron said as they walked back to the castle after practice.

"I've flown with him almost every Sunday." Harry walked with his eyes closed letting the sound and presence of Ron and Ginny lead him along in the dark.

"Are you alright Harry?" Ginny slipped her hand into his.

"Yeah." Harry felt immediately better just touching Ginny and sighed. "When ever you're with me I feel great." He grinned at her but he wasn't fooling anyone.

"If you didn't feel so bad, I'd probably puke over that line." Ron snorted then yelped when Ginny smacked him with her broom across his backside.

"Just be glad it's my broom and not my foot." Ginny warned.

Harry laughed then sighed tiredly and paused. "I wouldn't offend anyone if I turned into a phoenix would I?"

"No." Ron and Ginny said together then Ron asked. "Are you still going to Snape tonight? Why not take a night off? It's not like it is required reading or anything."

"I might do that but I've got to tell him in any case." Harry rubbed his scar. Ginny removed his hand and rubbed hers across the lightening shaped mark. Harry leaned against her touch for a long moment with his eyes closed taking slow deep breaths. When he opened his eyes, Harry saw Ron gazing at him with a mixture of feelings in his freckled

face. "Thanks Ginny." Harry yawned and removed her hand from his forehead, trying to stifle a grimace with out much success. Giving Ginny's hand a kiss Harry said. "See you back in the common room." He handed Ron his broom and the next instance Harry changed into a phoenix and circled above them.

"I hope that bird is house-broke." Ron quickly ducked his head as phoenix Harry dived bombed him. "I was only joking." Ron called after the scarlet bird flying ahead of them. Then in a burst of flames Harry flapped in place outside of Snape's quarters. Harry didn't think Snape would be impressed if he appeared in his quarters without knocking.

Transforming back to his human self Harry knocked on the door. It swung open and an irritated potion master glared at him. "You're late Potter. Ten points from Gryffindor."

"Hello Professor Snape." Harry stared at him benignly. "I've been." He paused as the ache came back to his scar. "I've been having a lot of pain today, in my scar. I thought maybe we could skip tonight." Harry was too tired to get angry over the still irritated look Snape gave him.

"Tell me Potter. Will your scar hurt less if you don't translate the book tonight?" Snape drawled.

"Probably not." Harry sighed. Snape stepped back as the runespoor came over to Harry just inside of the door. "Hi Giza, Hi Kesho, Hi Hapa." Harry stroked the flat orange heads in turn. "Let's get this over with then." Harry said looking tiredly at Snape.

"Start at the third paragraph on the thirty-ninth page." Snape said walking to his desk and handing Harry the book.

"Fine." Harry saw the look on Snape's face had changed but only when he sat down with the runespoor by the fire did he realize Snape might have been showing concern for him. Harry snorted to himself. Even Snape's pleasant looks would probably scare first years into hysterics.

At first Harry listened to Hapa read. If the story had been remarkable it might have kept his interest. But the book seemed to Harry the

ramblings of an old man. Only once when there was a mention of blood spilt at Hogwarts did Harry pay attention but there were no details so Harry slipped back into his own thoughts.

Unfortunately tonight his own thoughts were being pushed aside by the pain he felt. Without knowing Harry stopped speaking and found himself frozen to the will of Voldemort. Faintly Harry heard Snape speaking sharply to him. Hapa hissed for Snape to leave Harry alone.

Inside his mind Harry heard a voice. "A runespoor? Where did you get a runespoor Potter?" Then Voldemort added. "A very large and old runespoor at that." Then the presence in his head gasped. "The runespoor shield! You have it?" It was more of a statement than a question.

But Harry gathered his strength and pushed Voldemort's thoughts out of his mind. Barely able to open his eyes, Harry lay panting beside the thick orange coils of the runespoor.

"Potter?" Snape's voice came from at least twenty feet away. "Tell the runespoor I will not hurt you." Harry managed to hiss at Hapa and Giza. Kesho was rubbing Harry's face with her head. She hissed at Snape when he knelt beside Harry. "Drink this Potter."

A vial was pressed to Harry's lips and he gulped down the potion. Immediately Harry felt strength radiate through his body and he sat up holding his head. "What happened Potter?" Harry felt Snape's hands steady his body as he was helped to the couch.

"Voldemort saw the runespoor." Harry finally said. "He guessed about the shield." Harry looked up into Snape's face. It was there again, a genuine look of concern for him. "Hang on a moment." Harry concentrated and tried to change to his phoenix form. It took him two attempts before he could make the transformation.

The next moment he saw three sets of fangs headed his way. Harry sprang into the air and flew over to Snape's desk. Snape struggled against the couch underneath the thick orange coils. The runespoor had knocked him off balance and on to the couch as she crawled up him to get to the phoenix. "Stop." Harry swayed on his own two feet in

front of the desk. "It's only me. I told you my animagus form was a phoenix."

"Yessss, But it is unsettling to see one we are fond of become such an evil creature." Hapa tongue flicked in and out as if trying to taste the phoenix in him.

"Please get off Professor Snape." Harry sighed. "Sorry Professor, they don't like phoenixes."

"I gathered that." Snape stood up and straightened his robes. "It is not surprising. Birds and serpents are natural enemies." He stooped and picked up the old book from the floor. "Perhaps we should continue this, another night Potter. You will want to tell the Headmaster about the Dark Lord's attempt to enter your mind no doubt."

Nodding Harry leaned against Snape's desk. "I don't know the password to his office."

"But you hardly need it." Snape snorted and Harry jumped when the noise came from right next to him. "The headmaster wouldn't mind you erupting into his office as a phoenix."

"I don't think I can." Harry hated to admit it to Snape. "I'm too tired."

"If you had an ounce of discipline Potter you would be even more dangerous than you are now." Snape sneered as he took the seat at his desk. The potion master seemed like he was going to continue his jibe when Harry hissed at the runespoor and the creature slithered over and crawled up his frame. "What are you doing Potter?" Snape asked coldly.

Harry turned and gave him a disappointed gaze. "I'm glad my pain gives you so much amusement. Too bad I couldn't find anything funny when Voldemort was torturing you. We might have enjoyed a laugh together." Harry turned and staggered toward the door with the weight of the runespoor across his shoulders.

"Where are you going with the runespoor? We haven't finished the book." Snape stood up sounding worried.

"I'm finished." Harry turned back hotly. "I'm finished with your insults and snide remarks and...and I just don't need the hassle." Harry faltered. He didn't even want to argue with the greasy git. "Oh my book." Harry stepped back to see Snape holding the book. He stared at him for long time. "Have a good read." Harry turned back to the door and managed to open it.

"Potter!" Snape called sharply.

"What?" Harry didn't even turn around this time.

"I'm...I'm sorry." Snape did sound apologetic. Slowly Harry turned to look at him.

"About what?" Harry wasn't going to let him off the hook that easily.

Snape eyes narrowed. "I didn't mean to imply I like seeing you in pain." When Harry kept his stony gaze on him Snape sighed. "I wish there was some potion I could give you." Now confusing crossed Snape's face. "What do you want from me?"

Harry studied the pale face. The black eyes shifted uneasily and Harry noticed Snape swallow nervously. "Perhaps, the same thing I wanted from the Headmaster." Harry said thoughtfully.

"And what was that Potter?" Snape's eyes glinted.

"The simple acknowledgement that I don't deserve this pain any more than you did." Harry adjusted the runespoor across his shoulders. She was getting heavy.

Slowly sitting down, Snape closed his eyes and rested his chin in his hands. He tapped his mouth with his fingers and took several deep breaths. Looking at the top of his desk instead of Harry Snape said. "It is not in my nature to be sympathetic Potter." Snape shook his head. "Sympathy and being a Death Eater just wasn't a viable mixture."

“Well you’re not a death eater anymore.” Harry said as he let the runespoor slide to the floor telling her to warm herself by the fire. He knew there was no way he would be able to carry her up to Gryffindor tower tonight. “So practice. I’m going to see Professor Dumbledore. Goodnight Professor.”

“It is sugar plum, the password.” Snape said quietly. Harry turned and nodded his thanks.

Never had the walk to Dumbledore’s office been so long. Even the spiral stairs seemed to turn slower than normal as Harry rode them up to the Headmaster’s door. Gently Harry knocked and the door opened.

“Harry?” Dumbledore was at his side in an instance. The old wizard took his arm and helped him to a seat. “What has happened?”

For a long moment Harry just sat with his eyes closed. Then between yawns Harry told Dumbledore of Voldemort’s intrusion into his thoughts. “And I could tell he really wants the runespoor shield. He seemed to know about it.” Harry covered his mouth as he gaped wide. “I’m sorry. I’m so sleepy.” Vaguely Harry felt Dumbledore take his arm and lead him into his private quarters.

When Harry roused in the night he knew immediately he wasn’t in his own bed. The four poster bed’s luxurious softness made him aware of this before he even opened his eyes to the silvery bed hangings. As he sat up Harry heard Fawkes give a soft chirp. The next moment Dumbledore stood at the bedside.

“How do you feel Harry?” Dumbledore’s face etched with worry.

“I’m alright.” Harry threw back the covers. “I was just so tired. What time is it?”

“Three in the morning.” Dumbledore still studied him closely. “If you feel up to it I will walk with you back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry nodded and got out of the bed. “After you fell asleep I spoke with Professor Snape.” Dumbledore led the way through his fireplace and into the office.

“He told me his version of Voldemort’s attempt to enter your mind.” The spiral stairs started downward as they stepped on to it. “Has this happened before?”

“No, well, only that once, after Hogsmeade.” Harry said feeling tainted. “But this time I was strong enough to push him out.”

“I see.” Dumbledore sighed. “I must tell you Harry, this worries me.”

“I’m not thrilled about it either.” Harry gritted his teeth as the pain in his scar came back.

“Don’t you see Harry? He is trying to wear you down. To erode what resistance you have built up.” Dumbledore said grimly. “For what purpose only Voldemort knows.”

“But it can’t be good.” Harry finished as they climbed the stairs to the Fat Lady’s corridor. “I don’t know what to do Professor.” Harry felt a little scared.

“At the moment I am at a loss too.” Dumbledore stopped when they reached the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. “But I do know you mustn’t let yourself get run down and vulnerable. You will go to Madam Pomfrey every morning for a strengthening solution.” Harry opened his mouth to protest but the shake from the headmaster’s head made him stop. “It’s not the best solution Harry but right now we must treat the symptoms in lieu of finding a cure.”

“I understand.” Harry sighed and rubbed his neck. “I’ll do as you say Professor.”

“Thank you Harry.” Dumbledore sighed too. “I still think Occlumency would help.” Before Harry anger could interrupt the old wizard plunged on. “Perhaps some alterations of the procedure, you must

admit, clearing your mind helps. I know the risk and the pain fall on your shoulders but I see no other course of action."

"Perhaps." Harry said slowly and deliberately then he looked up into Dumbledore's shocked face. "What?"

"Just for a moment you sounded strangely like Professor Snape." The twinkle in the blue eyes glinted as an amused smile came to the old wrinkled face. "Good night Harry."

"Good night Professor." Harry said grudgingly feeling annoyed at the second comparison in one day of him to Snape.

As Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione entered the entrance hall on their way to breakfast Tuesday morning Professor McGonagall called to Hermione and Harry. "Miss Granger this way. Mr. Potter if you please a word." Giving Ron and Ginny a shrug, Harry and Hermione followed their transfiguration teacher to the room off the entrance hall. The headmaster stood beside two other people dressed in muggle clothes.

"Mom, Dad? What are you doing here?" Hermione gasped.

Harry eyes opened wide. "You're going to donate the blood we need for the potion." He said with awe and hope.

"Yes." Mrs. Granger nodded but looked apprehensive. "After what happened to that boy's folks and your note Harry we talked it over again."

"Note? What note?" Hermione looked at Harry. "Did you write to my parents?"

"I sent a note in with a letter to Remus." Harry flushed slightly under Hermione's stare. He hadn't told anyone about the contents of that post.

Mr. Granger sighed and shook his head. The note he held out to Hermione. It was very short.

‘Dear Mr. and Mrs. Granger,

About what Dumbledore asked of you that you declined, you said in the drawing room if there was anything I need all I had to do was ask. I’m asking.’

Mr. Granger looked hard at Harry. “You really think this is important?”

“Vital.” Harry said with all the conviction he had.

Mr. Granger took the note back from Hermione. “I have to tell you I’m still not sure about this but...we owe you so much Harry.”

“There is one thing.” Mrs. Granger said tentatively, blushing a little. “Will this potion work on muggles? Specifically, me?”

“We honestly do not know Martha.” Dumbledore smile slightly. “If you wish to try, you can ask Professor Snape if he thinks it would be safe.”

“I would just love to talk to the runespoor.” Mrs. Granger said brightly.

“As would Snape.” Harry laughed.

“Professor Snape.” Dumbledore stressed the title, eying Harry reproachfully. “Is ready for you in his quarters. I thought Harry and Hermione could escort you down.” Harry nodded. Hermione looked a bit nervous.

“How are you explaining their presence here at Hogwarts?” Hermione asked worriedly.

“With the latest murders the Grangers wish to see for themselves that Hermione is safe and secure here at Hogwarts.” Dumbledore said as if speaking to someone who had asked about them.

"Not bad." Harry grinned at Hermione who seemed satisfied. "Shall we?" He opened the door for the Grangers and Hermione.

Dumbledore followed Harry out and said brightly to the Grangers. "Enjoy your tour of the castle. If you have any questions afterwards I will be happy to answer them." He bowed and swept off toward his office. Harry saw students staring at the Grangers.

"This way please." Harry led the way down the steps to the dungeons. Shortly he knocked on Snape's door. Mr. and Mrs. Granger glanced around nervously.

"It's so dreary down here." Mrs. Granger whispered.

"And weird." Her husband added with a shudder. The door opened and both Grangers took a step back as Snape's looming presence startled them.

"Professor Snape." Hermione took the initiative. "These are my parents. Robert and Martha Granger." She turned to her parents. "This is Professor Snape, our potions master."

"And no doubt her favorite teacher." Snape smirked as he stepped back for them to enter. Hermione gazed at Snape as if he had grown an extra head. "This way please."

The runespoor slid over to Harry. The three heads bumped and rubbed against him. Mrs. Granger smiled but Mr. Granger stepped well away from the huge serpent. "It's okay. Mr. Granger they are just worried about me." Harry didn't want say the runespoor was concerned about what had happened the previous night.

Snape led the group down a short hall to a heavy wooden door. He took out his wand and spoke words Harry didn't understand and the door swung inward. Snape stepped inside and held the door. He gave a quick motion for everyone to enter. A large cavern suddenly blazed with light as torches on the walls flared to life. Many long wooden tables filled center of the cave, two of them completely empty. Along the walls were cabinets with jars and vials beyond count.

"If you would lie on the tables I have cleared. I think that would be the easiest way." Snape said stepping up to them.

"Could I see this potion's instructions?" Mrs. Granger asked standing beside the table.

"You want to see it?" Harry could see Snape controlling a smirk. "Why? You would not understand it." Hermione started to open her mouth in anger but Harry stepped on her foot and shook his head slightly.

"As a teacher I'm surprised you would even ask why." Mrs. Granger stared back at Snape with no hint of apprehension on speaking her mind. "Learning is the key to understanding."

The potion master gave a smirk and glanced at Hermione but didn't say a word. He picked up a roll of parchment and handed it to the woman. "I see where your daughter gets her... persistence."

Harry fought with all he had to keep from laughing. From Snape that was a compliment. Mrs. Granger opened the scroll and scanned it. Harry watched Snape. The potion master seemed to be going out of his way to keep the Grangers happy.

"Why human blood?" Mrs. Granger asked. "It seems to be the base of the potion."

"I believe your daughter can answer that." Snape said turning his eyes on Hermione.

"Human blood usually makes the potion irreversible." Hermione answered.

"What do you mean usually?" Mrs. Granger asked her daughter.

"There are a few exceptions in any case." Hermione replied. "The few known antidotes have only been developed after years of research."

Snape stared at Hermione for a moment. "She is correct."

“So once taken, a person will always have the ability to speak with snakes?” Mrs. Granger eyes opened wide. “How wonderful. Do you think it would work on muggles? The headmaster said I should ask you if it would be safe.”

Again it was plain Snape was taken aback by her question. Slowly he answered. “Perhaps. I have not made muggles subjects to study the effects of potions. However over the time it takes to brew the potion I will analyze the recipe and give you my learned opinion.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Mrs. Granger said brightly. “I suppose we should get started with this.” She climbed onto the table and stretched out. Her husband following her lead was soon lying on the other table with his arm bared with blood dripping slowly from it into a container on the floor.

After the Grangers had finished their donation, Harry and Hermione escorted her parents back to the room off the entryway. They hugged Hermione and Mr. Granger shook Harry’s hand. When Mrs. Granger gave Harry a hug too, she pressed a letter into his hand and whispered “From Remus.” Then the Grangers took a port key back to number twelve Grimmauld Place.

Quickly Harry stuffed the note into his bag. He didn’t want Hermione to see Remus had written. Asking advice was hard with over curious friends around. Harry waited until Ron and Hermione went off to potions after lunch before he pulled the letter back out and read.

“Dear Harry,

I gave the note to the Grangers like you asked without reading it. What ever you wrote helped them change their minds. Martha was keener on the idea than Robert. She does like the runespoor a lot. Robert, on the other hand, feels a bit like Molly does about snakes and the thought of talking to one isn’t on his list of things he wants to do.

I was glad to hear from you. I know there isn't a lot you can put in the post about certain subjects but I do get some information from the headmaster. However the advice you asked for I can whole heartedly give to you. I understand why you can't ask Ron and Hermione about Ginny. I asked Martha to give this to you instead of sending it by owl so you could read it easier in private.

When you asked about love I got all choked up to realize you haven't heard those words in fifteen years. I hope you know you are loved by many people who care about you, even if they haven't said the words. I almost wrote those three words here but decided to let Ginny be the one to say them first to you. For the first time, you would rather have the memory of them from a pretty girl than a graying old werewolf.

What does being in love feel like? People have been asking this question since Wes Sly's time. All I can tell you it's different for everyone and it's different with each person you love. Example, Ron and Hermione are your friends, but you don't feel the same about the two of them, not that you love one better than the other, just differently.

So when is the right time to say the words to Ginny? This is one of those things that the old cliché rings true; you'll know when the time is right. I know it sounds lame but it's true. Some say; don't rush it or you may scare her away. On the other hand others say, the sooner it's said the better.

I give lousy advice don't I? To be honest I think; if you feel, it you should say it, no matter what the consequences might be. Many loves have been lost for fear of saying those three simple words. You have a good heart Harry, go with that and I don't think you'll be sorry.

If you want any more confusing advice I'll be happy to be of assistance.

Take care,

Remus"

Sighing Harry reread the letter several times. It was confusing. Ever since the dance or more so after the dance, Harry kept having these feelings toward Ginny. Feelings strong enough to quiet the ever present pain in his scar, even when she wasn't there. But these feelings themselves caused an aching or longing, Harry wasn't sure which.

He sighed again and thought of that night on the couch by the fire. Yes, they had kissed and hugged and if Ginny would have permitted, they would have probably done much more but it wasn't the necking, it wasn't being breathless and wanting her in a physical sense, Harry knew the feelings he had for Ginny went much deeper. This sensation gave him power he never felt before. She made him feel strong and powerful, strong enough to defeat Voldemort if they came face to face.

Harry snorted. He wasn't going to delude himself about his abilities compared to Voldemort's. Still, this feeling, this power the dark lord knows not, if this was just the start of that power...Harry sighed wondering if it was wise to consider even if it was just in his mind, that there might be a chance he could defeat Voldemort.

Putting the letter back in his school bag Harry headed off to the transfiguration classroom for his animagus training. The strengthening solution Harry had taken that morning seemed to be working until he started doing rapid transformations. After six changes Harry returned to his human form and leaned against the desk panting.

"Potter? Harry?" Professor McGonagall took him by the arm and helped him into a chair.

"I don't know what's wrong." Harry pressed a hand on to his scar.

"I thought it would be obvious Potter." McGonagall patted his back to take the bite out of her words. "Your mind is with Seamus and you're exhausted. The Headmaster has told me of your difficulty in sleeping."

"If I have trouble changing into my phoenix form I'll never be able to sleep." Harry groaned. "Sirius could change even in Azkaban around the dementors. I don't understand why this is affecting me."

"Because you are still learning your form Potter. Sirius was a powerful grown wizard." McGonagall explained. "As good as you are Harry, you are still young and have not come into your full potential."

"Oh." Harry sighed. "So what should I do? Keep trying or rest?"

"My motherly instinct wants you to rest but the practical professor in me says you better keep trying." McGonagall eyed him over her square spectacles.

Harry saw the smile twitching at her lips but also the concern in her stern face. "Tell the motherly McGonagall thanks for the sentiment but my professor's advice should always be heeded."

"I should say." McGonagall laughed then stopped when he rubbed his scar. "Perhaps you should see the headmaster."

"I'll see him later this evening." Harry said then his face sobered. "Have you seen Seamus?"

"Yes, I went to visitation during lunch. He's doing as well as he can." McGonagall's eyes misted. "The funerals are tomorrow morning."

"I think the Gryffindor sixth years should be allowed to attend." Harry felt a lump rise in his throat.

"The Headmaster and I are discussing the matter." Professor McGonagall said sadly. "He sees no reason why you can't all attend and I agree. Seamus will need his Gryffindor family in attendance."

"Really?" Harry asked a bit surprised. "I thought he might think it too dangerous."

"You-know-who is not strong enough in numbers to attack at a funeral with more witches and wizards than he has followers." McGonagall's

eyes blazed. "You've seen his methods, killings in the dead of night with no hint or warning before hand, who can defend against that?"

"We'll be there for Seamus." Harry said firmly.

A large sigh came from the stern woman beside him. "I shudder to think..." She stopped herself. Just from the look in her eyes Harry knew what she was thinking. How many more funerals would students have to attend? She cleared her throat and said instead. "As for now, I think you should practice changing into your animagus form. Not quick changes but firm and steady transformations." Harry nodded and stood up to practice.

The day did not reflect the somber mood around the gravesite. A light breeze brought the sent of spring into the bright sunny morning. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Parvati and Lavender stood solemnly with the head of Gryffindor house waiting for the funeral to begin. Seamus had been surprised to see them all there. And never leaving Seamus' side, Harry saw Dean occasionally put a hand on Seamus' shoulder as if to steady him.

Harry wished Ginny was there beside him but then thought she had enough on her plate without attending a funeral. Casually Harry gazed around the large cemetery. This section they stood in was very old by the look of the headstones. Off to the right in the distance Harry saw a large monument or perhaps mausoleum. It was certainly large enough Harry thought. It rose above the many large headstones around its white granite pillars.

An old wizard in black robes trimmed in Irish green strode up to the gravesite and all turned their attention to him. "As the oldest living McVey it grieves me to have to say goodbye to these two fine young people." Harry listened to the old wizard speak of Seamus' mother's life then of her marrying a muggle. Slight smiles ran around the crowd as different memories brought back happier times. Then a long pause in his speech made Harry think he was finished. But the dark eyes gazed intently over the crowd pausing occasionally then settled on Seamus.

“Seamus, the burden of loss is heavy on ya lad.” Tears sprang to the old wizard’s eyes. “Thar’s little comfort in words this I know. But take comfort in the strength and presence of the people about you.”

The eyes glinted sharply and gazed to the mourners again. With a voice louder than Harry thought could come from the old man he growled. “And you! If any of ya has a drop of Irish blood in ya.” He pointed to the crowd. “Vow on these graves here and now to stand against this evil thing they call the Dark Lord till he’s not but a memory in your nightmares.”

Cries of ‘Aye’ and ‘you said it’ rose in affirmation from the crowd then the mourners gathered around Seamus each one patting him or giving him a hug in silent promise of allegiance.

Professor McGonagall led the Gryffindors closer to speak once more to Seamus before going back to Hogwarts. They waited as an overenthusiastic uncle seemed intent on crushing Seamus as he hugged his nephew. Looking away Harry gazed across the headstones again and his caught his breath.

At this angle Harry could read the name on the large structure he had seen earlier. Taking a couple of deep breaths Harry turned to McGonagall. “Professor, do I have time to go over there.” Harry nodded to the sunlit monument.

The witch followed his gaze. Her eyes grew misty. “Of course Potter.” McGonagall swallowed hard. “Do not be long though.”

“I’ll be right back.” Harry said to Ron and Hermione.

“We’ll come with you.” Hermione said quickly. Harry knew by the look on his friends’ faces that she and Ron had seen the name too.

“Yeah Harry you shouldn’t go there alone.” Ron agreed.

“No.” Harry said sharper than he had intended. He repeated gently. “No. I appreciate you wanting to come with me but I want to go alone.” He backed away. “I’ll be right back.” Harry turned and walked

quickly across the cemetery to the Potter family plots.

The wizard cemetery seemed almost alive from all the whispering Harry heard as he got closer to the monument. Long before he reached the shrine, the name Potter started appearing on old tombstones around him. A couple stood out from the rest Absalom Potter; born September 4th 712, Died November 11, 871 and underneath 'Time is the wisest of all counselors.' And; Lake Richard Potter; born March 8th 1205, died May 28th 1401 with 'Time is itself an element' subscribed below. Scanning the area for newer headstones Harry recognized many names from the book Ginny had given him for Christmas.

Then he saw them. A headstone shaped like a double heart had the names, James Potter Beloved Husband and Lily Potter cherished wife chiseled into the mountain red granite. Tears started down his cheeks as Harry stood gazing at the graves of his parents. Harry wasn't sure what he had expected to find or feel. He reached out a hand and touched the smooth face of the stone and traced the names with his finger.

Wiping his face on his robe sleeve, Harry didn't really know what to do now. It almost seemed silly to him to speak to a piece of stone. He sighed and turned to gaze at the huge structure in the center of the Potter area. The sun's rays shimmered over the highly polished surface of a very old mausoleum. High pillars accented each corner with an entrance to the east. Harry stepped a bit nearer to read the inscription on the closest pillar.

'He that lacks time to mourn, lacks time to mend.
Eternity mourns that. 'Tis an ill cure
For life's worst ills to have no time to feel them.'

Sighing Harry turned back to his parents' graves and whispered. "I don't know if you can hear me but Mom, Dad, if you see the Finnigans tell them not to worry about Seamus. He will always have a family as long as there's a breath in any Gryffindor."

"Thanks Harry." Seamus said quietly making Harry jump and turn. Tears stood in the Irish eyes. "I'm sure they heard you." He cleared his throat. "All the things you could say to them and you tell them I'll be okay." Seamus sniffed not able to stop the tears.

"What do you say to people you don't know?" Harry shrugged. "I have no memory of them. You know what you have lost. That has to be harder." Harry said sadly.

"I think I would rather have something to remember than not." Seamus argued.

"Grief is grief." Harry sighed not wanting to continue this type of contest. "One hurt isn't easier than another."

"I suppose not." Seamus turned to stare off toward his parents graves. "Professor McGonagall was going to send Ron to get you but I said I would bring you back."

"Okay, I'm ready." Harry sighed again. "When are you going to come back to Hogwarts?" He asked as they started across the cemetery.

"Oh, I don't know yet. Sometimes I want to now but..." Seamus hesitated.

"There are too many people around." Harry finished.

"Yeah." Harry could feel Seamus' gaze on him as they walked by a tombstone with 'Fredrick Potter engraved on it. Harry glanced back thinking it odd there were no dates on the stone but instead a short line. 'His time's forever, everywhere his place.'

"Harry?" Seamus touched his arm and stopped. "I need to ask you something."

"What Seamus?" Harry studied the grieving face.

"I know you saved Ron's dad last year. I also heard you kept the attack on Ottery St. Catchpole from being a rout." Seamus shifted on his feet. "And I heard you saved Hermione's whole family over the

Holidays.” Harry dropped his gaze to the ground. He knew what the question was. “Is there a reason you couldn’t save my parents? It wasn’t because of last year?”

“No! Seamus no.” Harry looked up horrified. “Voldemort has wised up and is letting his Death Eaters plan the killings without telling him.” Harry grabbed Seamus by the shoulder and shook him a bit. “Believe me, if I had known...last year doesn’t matter. Even if you thought I was a lunatic this year I would have saved them if I had known.”

When he still saw the doubt on Seamus’ face Harry added. “Hell, I even saved Snape. So that should prove I would save anyone.” Immediately Harry realized he probably shouldn’t have said that. Not only would Snape not like a rumor going around the school that Harry had saved him, the events over the Christmas holiday was not general knowledge.

“You saved Snape?” Seamus said in awe. “How?”

“Look I’ll tell you but you can’t say a word. I shouldn’t have said anything but...” Harry said starting to walk toward the Gryffindors waiting to go back to Hogwarts. He had finished a quick version of what had happen on Christmas when they had reached others.

“I promise Harry not a word, to anyone.” Seamus said softly then louder. “I’ll see you all back at Hogwarts.”

Author’s notes: Thanks for the reviews!!!

You know you are getting to involved with a fiction when you go to write the date and get a panic feeling that the date is wrong because in the fiction it’s February not October. And I had this weird dream Harry went back to the Burrow alone...it was soo sad. If it had fit in the story I would have found a place for it.

Stupid computers, had trouble with my cd burner and ms word was giving me a hard time not saving things right. I know, blame the

computer. Anyway, I really didn't want to end this chapter here but this was getting pretty long so I did. ;o)

I've got a challenge for the readers. I spotted a major mistake in this story. According to Harry Potter Lexicon it would be a mistake. Not a plot problem but more a scene error. Like if this is true...this other thing couldn't happen. I reread the story from time to time to make sure I have all the loose strings in my hands and spotted it. I remembered having a fix for this very thing but forgot to put it in.

So can anyone find it? It's not about spelling, punctuation or grammar. I'll give you that much to go on. At the end of the chapters I'll tell you if anyone was close and give you another clue to go on. If nobody has found it by the end of the story I'll tell you.

Chapter 46

The quidditch match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff was postponed for a week. To give time for Dean Thomas to return to Hogwarts and practiced with Colin Creevey and Mark Evans for the upcoming match.

Snape seemed to be going out of his way to be, Harry wouldn't go as far as to say nice but he was a lot less unpleasant than normal. Harry accredited this to the Snake Speak Potion Snape had started brewing in his private lab. On the evenings Harry went to Snape's quarters he made a point of asking the potions master about the mixture. Always Snape would stare at him with narrowed eyes and Harry could see the pale face tense in holding back a scathing remark but eventually Snape would answer his question.

A strange clock like device now appeared on the corner of Snape's desk. The apparatus had a face with numbers on each of its six sides and a hand on each face ticked away at different speeds. Oddly the time keeper made no noise. Harry wondered if a silencing charm was used on it. Snape explained the timer's purpose, to help him keep track of adding ingredients to the snake speech potion. "Each item needs precisely timed insertion. There is another such device in the lab linked to this one." Snape said indicating the brass time piece. "One second too late and a person could end up being a snake instead of being able to speaking to one."

Harry stared at Snape stunned. "Hermione said the potion was complex"

Snape stared back then said slowly. "I must admit Potter, this potion is a challenge even for me."

"But you will be able to finish it?" Harry asked then wondered if it had been wise.

"Yes," Snape drawled, setting out parchment, ink and quill. "But unlike students, if I should make a mistake, I have enough sense to start over and not try to fix it."

"How long will this take to brew?" Harry asked sitting on the couch by the fire. The runespoor flowed on to it and put some of her coils into Harry's lap.

"Sixty six days, six hours and six minutes and six seconds." Snape said unrolling the parchment and opening a bottle of ink. "Let me ask you a question Potter."

"What?" Harry looked up from the book he had opened for Hapa to read.

"Why did you not take N.E.W.T. Potions? You qualified, as amazing as that was." Snape smirked.

Dropping his gaze back to the old book Harry wondered if he should tell the truth or at least part of it. "Because, I didn't want to have to deal with you, Professor." Harry glanced up to see Snape's eyebrows raise and the man snorted.

"And yet here you are in my company again." Snape smirked. "Strange how fate throws two people together despite their best efforts to avoid each other."

"I'm just lucky I guess." Harry snorted back. "Where do you want to start tonight?" He turned pages in the book as Snape gave him the page and paragraph. Although the part of the book they had read was thicker than what they hadn't read, Harry wished not for the first time they were completely finished.

On Saturday with a lead of ninety to zero, the watching crowd, including most of the Hufflepuffs, believed the Gryffindors were certain to win. The new first year chaser surprised even his teammates by making four goals in the first fifteen minutes of the match.

But when the Golden Snitch flitted over the stands and Ginny missed her first grab at it, the Hufflepuff seeker, Owen Cauldwell, didn't give

her a second chance. The stands were stunned silent when Madam Hooch blew her whistle and announced.

"Hufflepuff wins 150 to Gryffindor 90." A loud groan issued from the red and gold flag waving fans as a cheer went up from the Hufflepuffs.

It took Harry an hour before he resorted to checking the Marauders' map to find her. He was relieved to see her name in the entrance to the collapsed tunnel they had used after the dance.

"There you are." Harry sighed taking off his invisibility cloak. "I was getting worried." The cave was stark and dreary without the furnishings he had conjured the night of the party. The only light was the tip of Ginny's wand showing her huddled in a corner.

"Go away." Ginny sniffed not looking at him.

Ignoring her plea Harry scrunched down beside her. "You wouldn't let me brood alone so it's pay back time."

"That was different. I let everyone down." Ginny sniffed again and pulled away when Harry tried to put his arm around her.

"Oh yeah, losing a quidditch match that will change the course of history." Harry nudged her. She scooted away from him. Harry sighed. "Are you cold? I could conjure a fire."

"I don't deserve to be warm." Ginny said sullenly then she opened her hand looked at her palm. "I had it Harry. I had it in my hand, I looked away and it was gone."

"I saw." Harry said.

"I'm so stupid. Time after time in practice you told me to not to take my eyes off the snitch." Ginny stood up and started pacing waving her arms. "And what did I do? I had to glance at Owen Cauldwell. You should chuck me off the team. I'm pathetic."

"You are being pathetic." Harry got up and took a hold of Ginny's shoulders. "But you are not pathetic. You made a mistake. And I think, you'll never make that same mistake again. Right?"

"I suppose not." Ginny sighed.

"That's not good enough Miss Weasley." Harry gave her shoulders a little shake. "Right?" He grinned.

"Right." A smile flickered across Ginny's lips. "Coach."

"So that's settled." Harry sighed as he pulled her into his arms and Ginny wrapped her arms around his waist. "I don't know a whole lot about his boy/girl stuff but I'm pretty sure chucking my girlfriend off the team would get me in loads of trouble." With satisfaction Harry felt Ginny start to laugh and she squeezed him.

"It took you long enough to find me." Ginny complained. "I thought this would be the first place you would look."

"Mmm, I did think of it once but I consider it a cheerful place, not a place to go to mope. Oooff" Ginny gave him a harder squeeze.

"I think of it as our place." Ginny said firmly. "I didn't tell anyone about it, not even Hermione."

"I didn't tell Ron either." Harry said. "Our place. I like the sound of that." He bent his head and kissed her letting his feelings flow through him like a current of power. 'Tell her now. Tell her now.' A little voice in his brain kept prodding but before he could get the courage Ginny broke the kiss.

"I'm sorry, Harry but I am cold and hungry." Ginny gave him a pathetic look.

"Come on, we can go nick something from the kitchens." Harry took her hand, his heart pounding. Why was it so scary to say three little words? Harry thought as he covered Ginny and himself with the cloak. Carefully they descended to the entry hall and down another stairway to a painting with a bowl of fruit.

What was that noise? Harry had been laying awake late that night thinking about Ginny. He concentrated on the faint wheezy hum, must be a new snore for Ron, Harry thought. Usually the redhead made a sound like a coffee pot. Maybe Ron has a bit of a cold. Harry considered then gave a small snort. Hermione had been sneezing the other day.

He yawned and rubbed his forehead. A dull ache had slowly returned after Harry had said goodnight to Ginny. It wasn't bad but Harry wanted to sleep and the pain was enough of a distraction to disrupt his rest. A feeling of want or desire came to Harry as he tried to clear his mind to ease into sleep. Not having much success Harry pursued the emotion to Voldemort's mind.

The image of the runespoor was foremost in the dark wizard's thoughts. "The runespoor shield will be mine." Echoed back to Harry to the exclusion of all else. Then an intense pain shot through his scar as Voldemort became aware of him.

"Where Potter? Where did you find the runespoor shield?" Voldemort asked with out preamble. He pressed Harry hard for an answer.

"What does it matter? I have it." Harry gritted his teeth and held his ground.

"I searched long for the device, almost as diligently as when I searched for the Chamber of Secrets." Voldemort admitted.

"I find the runespoor much more interesting than the shield." Harry said.

"Then you are a bigger fool than I thought Potter." Voldemort said angrily. "You have no idea what you have. The runespoor is merely a guardian."

Harry had to laugh. "You're telling me about what I have first hand knowledge of? Who is being the fool now?" He had steeled himself

for the rage of anger he knew Voldemort would fling at him. A gasp of pain escaped Harry as he fought to keep control.

"Then tell me about the runespoor Potter." Voldemort insisted. "Fill me in to what is so special about it."

"I would but it is late and I would like to get some sleep tonight." Harry braced himself to pull away. "I will tell you this, I consider them my friends."

"Friends?" Voldemort sneered. "You are swimming in sentimental swill Potter."

"Perhaps, but I know my friends will stay by my side no matter what." Harry felt his pain ease as he thought of Ron, Hermione and Ginny. "Can you say the same of your followers?" The futile years Voldemort spent waiting for his Death Eaters to find him and help him return had not been forgotten by the dark wizard. A surge of anger greater than any Harry had felt since the holidays surged through him. Terrible searing pain made his head feel like it had split at his scar.

With a struggle Harry pushed away from the dark mind and returned to his own. He laid panting and shaking trying to calm his frantically beating heart. His thoughts went to his phoenix form. A soft warm feeling crept through Harry's body as he heard in his mind pure notes of strength and healing. Comforted by the anchor his mind had found, Harry slipped off into a quiet sleep.

The sun shone brightly through the scarlet hangings around his bed the next morning when Harry awoke. Feeling more rested than he had in weeks Harry quickly dressed for lunch, having missed breakfast he was starving. He hurried down to the common room where he saw Ron and Hermione sitting by the fire.

"Harry I was just about to come up and get you." Ron said relieved.

"You look better today." Hermione said studying Harry closely. "You must have slept well."

"Yeah. Not bad after talking with Voldemort." Harry kept a smile off his face as Ron flinched at the name and looked stunned.

"You-know-who? I thought Dumbledore wanted you to stay away from contact like that." Ron sputtered.

"He never really said it like that." Harry ignored Ron's sharp stare. "Dumbledore said he was concerned by the contacts. He never said to stay away. Like I could if I tried."

"But still Harry it can't be good letting your defenses down." Hermione admonished.

"I don't know." Harry considered then shrugged. "It doesn't seem to make a difference. And I learn things from him." He lowered his voice so nobody could overhear. "Voldemort wants the shield."

"What?" Ron and Hermione gasped at the same time. Then Ron added. "How does he figure on getting it with you here?"

"I dunno." Harry shrugged and glanced to see Ginny coming in through the portrait hole. He did a double take. Her brown eyes blazed and her red-hair whipped back and forth like an irritated cat's tail as she glanced around the common room. Harry started to rise to see what was wrong but in a second she hovered over him before he could stand.

"What did you write to them?" Ginny glared as Harry shrank back in his seat.

"I don't know what you are talking about Ginny. What's wrong?" Harry stuttered.

Ginny growled and shoved a letter in his hand telling him to read it but before he could get past Dear Ginny, she went on ranting. "It's from Mom and Dad. They want me to stop going to St. Mungo's." Her voice shook with anger. "They heard from someone I was pushing myself too much."

"I didn't tell them that." Harry protested. "I haven't written anything to them." Ginny's eyes continued to bore into him. "I wrote to Remus but all I mentioned to him was that I was worried about you." Harry finished in a small voice.

"Stay out of my business." Ginny raged.

"I'm sorry." Harry glanced at Ron for help but both he and Hermione seemed interested in a hole in the couch they were sitting on. Harry swallowed hard. "You have to admit you are stretching yourself pretty thin." Immediately Harry knew that was the wrong thing to say.

"Just who are you to talk? You walk around like a zombie half the time but still have time for quidditch, the DA, animagus training, meetings with Dumbledore and reading for Snape." Ginny shouted and started poking him in the shoulder. "Yes, I'm busy but I am handling it. So keep your big nose out of my business." She wheeled and stomped through the common room to the stairs to the girls' dorm.

Harry sat frozen in shock. All the faces in the common room were turned to him and then a soft muttering filled the silence. Slowly he glanced at Ron and Hermione and both stared at him in sympathy. He tried to speak but a croaking noise came out. Clearing his throat Harry said. "I didn't....I wouldn't..." Not sure what he was trying to explain Harry closed his mouth and gave them a wretched look.

Hermione took pity on him. "Give her time to calm down Harry." She suggested. "Then you can talk to her about it." He nodded in gratitude. "Let's go down for lunch." Hermione stood up and pulled Harry to his feet.

Hungry as he was Harry just picked at his food. All he could see was the anger and fury in Ginny's eyes. What if she was angry with him forever? He should have told her how he felt last night, Harry thought. Maybe she wouldn't have been so upset with him.

"Harry?" Ron nudged him. "I asked you if you want to go down to see Hagrid with us?"

"Oh, sure." Harry hadn't even seen Ron and Hermione stand up. He scrambled from the bench and followed them out of the great hall.

The sun shone as brightly as when he had awakened but Harry felt like a dark cloud followed him across the Hogwarts grounds. He hardly listened as Ron and Hermione chatted with Hagrid.

"You alright Harry?" Hagrid nudged his elbow resting on the table knocking it out from under Harry's chin.

"He's got woman trouble." Ron snorted and Hermione elbowed him in the ribs.

"Ginny is mad at Harry." Hermione explained when Hagrid looked worried. "Nothing to worry about."

"Ah Harry." Hagrid patted him on the back knocking him into the table. "Oops sorry. Don't worry about them little fights. Making up is fun." Hagrid grinned at him and smirked a bit at Ron's look of dismay.

"I hope so." Harry said sighing rubbing his chin.

"You know, I've been thinking about that cat." Hagrid said changing the subject.

"We already know she's the one you brought to Harry's party Hagrid." Hermione said. Despite Dumbledore's caution of not telling people about Cleo's time travel, Harry had told Hagrid.

"Yeah, But after you told me that, I remembered what Lily said when she told the kitten had gone missing." Hagrid said thoughtfully.

"What?" Harry's eyes brightened with interest. "You said she told you it ran away."

"Actually I remember Lily saying she was missing. Not exactly a run away." Hagrid pointed out. "Then when I said 'I hope she'll be alright.' I remember thinking it a bit odd Lily wasn't more worried about the kitten; your mum had a soft heart Harry and it wasn't like her to be so

callous because all she said, and I remember it being a little bit odd, but she says; 'Only time will tell.'

"Well that makes sense now Hagrid." Hermione said. "We know about when Harry's Mom sent Cleo and why she used a cat but we still don't understand the purpose of sending her forward in time."

"Ah well, to use her words hopefully time will tell that too." Hagrid said.

With his mind on Ginny, absentmindedly Harry agreed when Hagrid asked him to bring the runespoor to Care of Magical Creatures classes. Vaguely Harry nodded when Hagrid said he'd make arrangements with him later.

Feeling restless Harry said he needed to do some homework. Hagrid stared at him then said. "Go on then, Harry. Go find her." The large man said kindly, knowing the real reason for Harry's departure.

Ron and Hermione trooped back across the grounds with Harry, barely able to keep up with him without running. Harry didn't slow down until he ran into Ginny near Professor McGonagall's office. Ron and Hermione patted his shoulder and said they would see them at dinner.

"Ginny!" Harry froze. What should he say? "I...I'm sorry."

The brown eyes meeting his looked guilty. "I'm the one who's sorry Harry. I'm really sorry about yelling at you. But I was really upset." Ginny said.

"I could tell." Harry stepped closer cautiously. "Honestly, all I wrote to Remus was I was worried about you."

"I understand that." Ginny looked at him sternly. "Harry, I have Mom, Dad and six brothers all worrying about me and trying to tell me how to live my life. I don't need a boyfriend doing the same thing. Got it?"

"Got it." Harry nodded. "I promise, no more sticking my big fat nose into your business, unless... you want me to."

"Sorry about saying that." Ginny giggled but her smile disappeared quickly. "I'm going to floo Mom and Dad. Professor McGonagall said I could use her office for privacy."

"See you at dinner?" Harry took her hand and kissed her cheek.

"As soon as I'm done." Ginny squeezed his hand. Harry let go and watched her knock then open the office door and go inside.

Sighing Harry headed down to the great hall. At least she wasn't angry with him, he thought. But Ginny didn't show up for dinner. And she wasn't in the common room when Harry, Ron and Hermione returned to Gryffindor tower afterwards. Hermione hurried to the girls' stairs saying she would check in the dorm.

Five minutes later Hermione returned with a concerned look on her face. "What isn't Ginny there?" Harry almost bolted up to his room to get the Marauders' map but Hermione stopped him.

"Yes, she's up there Harry, but Ginny wants to be alone. She said she has some serious thinking to do." Hermione looked worried, which made Harry even more worried.

"What does she have to think about?" Ron asked.

"Ginny didn't say but it's obviously about her going to St. Mungo's." Hermione said.

"Do you think she'll be alright?" Harry glanced at the stairs he wished he could ascend.

"Ginny will be fine." Hermione said firmly. "Just give her some space Harry." She smiled at him sympathetically and gave him a quick hug.

"Thanks Hermione." Harry sighed. "I think I'll go up to bed." He just wanted this day to be over. At least she wasn't mad at him anymore. Harry kept telling himself as he lay with the curtains around his bed pulled shut. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, he'd tell her. He'd tell her he needed to talk to her then he would say the words. That would put

things right. Harry thought with a nod and then sighed as he drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

When Hermione came down to the common room the next morning she told Harry who had been waiting that Ginny must be at breakfast already since her room was empty. So Harry, Ron and Hermione hurried to the great hall but Ginny wasn't there either.

"Why would she come down so early without us?" Harry said feeling a bit hurt.

"I told you Harry she needs some space so don't get offended." Hermione warned him.

Between morning classes Harry hurried to find Ginny and give her a note. She gave him a sad smile and said she would see him later. A strange uneasy feeling crept into Harry's chest from the resolute look in her brown eyes.

Later in the afternoon before dinner Harry had given up waiting for Ginny in the common room and went in search of her. He met Parvati and Lavender on his hunt. Both girls were as giggly as ever and Harry walked with them for a short ways before running into Ginny, who was coming out of Professor McGonagall's office.

"See you later Harry." Parvati said smiling.

"Bye Harry." Lavender waved airily.

"Am I glad to see you." Harry sighed. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine Harry." Ginny said. "I need to talk to you."

Again Harry felt a pressure on his chest from the tone in her voice. "Do you want to go to our place?" Harry suggested.

"NO!" Ginny looked almost scared at the thought. "No," She repeated quietly. "Let's use a classroom. Over here." Ginny led him to an empty class room.

Ginny made sure the door was shut then slowly turned to Harry. They both spoke at once but Ginny shook her head and asked. "Please Harry let me go first. This is hard enough..."

"What?" Harry stepped closer to take her hand but Ginny backed away and turned her back to him. "Ginny?"

Taking a deep breath Ginny turned and met Harry's eyes. He could see she was shaking. "What I need from you right now is understanding." She stopped him again from speaking or touching her. "Please let me say this." She swallowed hard. "Mom and Dad said I could continue to go to St. Mungo's but I had to give up something." Ginny drew another breath. "I can't give up being a prefect so the only other thing I could give up is quidditch." Harry gasped. "Please let me finish. I know that's going to be a problem for the team but I can't help it."

"It will be hard Ginny but I understand." Harry said reaching out to her but she drew back and he dropped his hand trying to dispel the coldness that seemed to have settled in the room. "Ginny?"

"Harry, I've given this a lot of thought too." Ginny dropped her gaze to the floor. "With everything you have going on and my O.W.L.s coming up," her voice faltered a bit but she kept on. "I just don't think either of us have time to be boyfriend and girlfriend."

The oxygen in the room seemed to have left. Harry felt the pressure of his lungs asking for breath of air but knew it wouldn't do any good to breath. Opening his mouth to tell her he loved her all Harry could croak was "I...I....I"

"Harry, believe me it's nothing you've done." Tears started down her freckled cheeks. "It's me. I'm only fifteen and have lots of time for boyfriends later in my life. Okay? Beside you need someone who isn't crying on your shoulder, like when I get back from St. Mungo's." Ginny said.

"But...Ginny." Harry managed to squeeze out of his bone dry mouth.

"Please, I don't want to get into a debate over this." Ginny sniffed and wiped her face then she took something from the pocket of her robe and pressed it into his hand and closed his fist over it. "If you need me, for, you know, your scar, I'll always be your friend." She stood on tiptoes and kissed his cheek then with out another word left.

Harry stood there blinking stupidly and tears running unchecked down his face. He felt petrified not able to move a single finger. But somehow Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower. And he found himself in bed without knowing really how he had gotten there.

The pain in his scar was nothing compared to the sharp ache in his chest where, if he had been inclined to look, Harry was sure his heart was missing. He lay curled up on his bed, staring at his fist. He hadn't looked but he knew what Ginny had put in his hand. The bracelet he had given her. The one that had been his mom's. The one she said she would keep forever.

The room gradually darkened and Harry lay not moving, glad of the gloomy grey room to match his mood. Neville and Dean came up to dump off their school bags before they went down to dinner. Harry was relieved when they left without saying a word.

The door to the dormitory burst opened the next thing Harry knew he was looking at the angry face of Ron, who had grabbed him by his robes. "What did you do to her?" Ron asked as he shook Harry.

Before Harry could muster any attempt at resistance, the runespoor appeared on the bed spitting and knocking Ron off Harry. The red eyes of the serpent seemed to glow as she raised all three heads in defense of her master.

"Blimey." Ron jumped back.

"Calm down, I'm alright." Harry choked on the words. He didn't feel alright. The runespoor's heads turned to inspect Harry.

"How did it get here?" Ron asked still several steps away from the bed.

"She's bound to protect the master of the shield." Harry said dully then to Hapa. "Please go to your bed by the window."

With the runespoor safely out of the way Ron's anger came back. "You broke up with Ginny? She's crying her eyes out." He fumed.

The thought of Ginny crying made Harry want to go find her. Maybe she would think it was all a mistake. But he had no energy to do more than answer Ron. "She broke up with me." Harry rubbed his forehead.

"Oh," Ron said confused. "But why? And if she broke with you why is she crying about it?"

"I don't know." Harry didn't want to talk about it. Thinking about it made the ache in his chest tighter. "Ask her."

Ron was silent for a long time. "Are you alright?" He finally asked, sitting on the bed beside Harry. Harry didn't look at him and just shrugged. "I know how I'd feel if Hermione broke up with me...miserable."

Tears came to Harry's eyes and he whispered hoarsely. "I was going to tell her I loved her today." His voice caught and he felt Ron's hand on his shoulder. "Maybe I waited too late to say it. Maybe she needed to hear it before this, but I didn't know." Harry buried his face in his pillow while Ron patted his back.

"I'm thinking I'm mad at Ginny now." Ron said thoughtfully.

"Don't be." Harry said with a muffled voice. "She needs someone who doesn't have a load of problems that keep dumping onto her." Harry sighed. "She's better off with someone else."

"You're being way too hard on yourself Harry." Ron patted his back again. "Like I said last year, you need someone a bit more cheerful. She's been a right wet blanket since going to St. Mungo's." Harry

shrugged and felt Ron get up from the bed. "Do you want me to hang around?" Ron asked.

"No you go on. I just need to...be alone." Harry said into his pillow.

"Okay, I'll bring you up some dinner if you want." Ron offered. Again Harry shrugged. Then he heard the dormitory door close and Harry settled back into his misery.

Then next minute the door had burst open again and Snape stood with his black robes billowing followed by Dumbledore and Ron.

"I told you he's fine." Ron said. "I just grabbed Harry and poof there she was."

Snape's dark eyes darted to the runespoor resting in her box by Harry's bed. Each head had rose and presented a daunting figure hovering next to Harry.

"Forgive the intrusion Harry," Dumbledore said apologetically. "Professor Snape thought something might be wrong when the runespoor disappeared from his quarters."

"No nothing is wrong." Harry bleakly. He had sat up at the Headmaster's entrance but didn't meet the gaze of either wizard. But Harry could feel Snape's eyes boring into him.

"Do not forget to bring her back to my quarters tonight Potter." Snape said as he turned to leave.

"No." Harry said quietly. "I won't be coming tonight. I just don't feel up to it."

Snape glared at him. But Harry still hadn't looked at him. "Feeling miserable because you got dumped by a girl is not an excuse to miss a reading session." Snape declared.

Now everyone's eyes were on the potions master. "How did you know that?" Ron asked.

If Snape was the type to blush Harry felt he would be doing it now but the wizard only looked a bit flustered when he sneered. "Potter's love life is the talk of the school. You'd have to be deaf not to have heard."

"Oh great." Harry groaned.

"I'm sorry to say Harry, it is a thing many young men go through." Dumbledore said sympathetically. "Time heals all wounds."

"Not all wounds." Harry said rubbing his forehead and sighing. "If you have time now Professor Snape, I'm not very hungry."

"No master. I will not go now. You need a break from this dark man." Hapa said hissing at Snape.

"Let's just get it over with Hapa, and then I won't have to see him again." Harry pleaded. The runespoor slithered on to the bed and stared closely at Harry.

"You are in pain again." Kesho stated. "But it is not from the curse scar this time."

"His heart hurts. I could smell that over there." Giza flicked her head back toward her bed.

"One must allow themselves time to feel pain." Kesho said. "Only then will the pain pass."

"I feel alright Kesho." Harry sighed not wanting to argue with Snape.

"We may be a bit deaf but we are not blind master." Kesho hissed and put her nose to his. "Rest. It heals."

"Harry?" Dumbledore's voice interrupted.

"Kesho thinks I need to rest." Harry flinched as Hapa tapped the back of his head with her nose, rather hard. "Hapa says so too."

"You have a wonderful guardian Harry." Dumbledore turned to Snape. "I do not think the runespoor will read for you tonight."

"So it seems." Snape glowered. "Let me know when the runespoor things you have recovered" The potion master stopped himself before he said a biting remark. "Sufficiently to repeat what she reads." He turned on his heels and disappeared down the stairs. Dumbledore paused to pat Harry's shoulder and then followed Snape.

"Greasy git." Ron muttered. "I can't believe we had a slimy Slytherin in our room. Let alone the Gryffindor tower." Harry gave a nod then lay back down on his bed. "Listen to the runespoor, Harry, get some rest." He gave Harry a pat on the shoulder as the headmaster had done then left.

The depression Harry fell into seemed to get deeper as the weeks went by. Waking was much like sleeping to him. He awoke in the morning and went to classes but his mind did not actively participate in lessons. Ron had all but taken over directing quidditch practice. Since Seamus had returned to Hogwarts Ron had to shuffle positions to replace Ginny as sneaker and fill all three chaser slots.

Hermione kept after Harry to eat but even her constant nagging couldn't make him keep food down. Harry would eat a few bites to keep her quiet but if he ate too much his stomach would reject it. Ginny kept away from the Gryffindor common room. Harry found he had an obsession of catching a glimpse of her in the halls and made a point of changing his path to his classes at the chance of seeing Ginny just walk down the corridors.

His inattentiveness began to show even in Transfiguration which was this year his best subject. When he raised his wand to conjure a rabbit, they had progressed to conjuring live creatures, a voice inside his head whispered. "Serpensortia." A large snake burst from the end of his wand. A couple of girls screamed.

"Potter!" Professor McGonagall stalked over and glared at him. "I know your fondness of snakes but this is not the lesson. Ten points from Gryffindors." She frowned then ordered. "Now get rid of it."

His hand shaking, Harry vanished the snake. He barely heard McGonagall asking him to stay behind after class. Hermione had to push him back into his chair when he got up to leave with her and Ron. "She wants to see you." She told him and left with Ron.

"Potter." Professor McGonagall sighed when Harry gave her a wounded gaze and her voice softened. "I know being a teenager is not easy." She jutted out her chin as her anger came back to her words. "But you can not allow it to affect your magic like this. It is very dangerous and not even acceptable for a student in their sixth year here at Hogwarts."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what happened." Harry felt a cold fear freeze any attempt of explaining to her. What had happened? He hadn't said that spell that had come from his lips.

"I will not accept that pitiful excuse, Potter." Her eyes blazed. "You are better than that and you are very lucky I did not give you detention."

"Yes Professor." Harry answered meekly.

"I warn you Potter, it is imperative for any witch or wizard to be in full control of their magic, for you especially." McGonagall lectured. "Now go on. And I suggest you reread chapter one of your first year transfiguration book. Perhaps a review would do you good." She glared one more time at him and walked back to her desk.

Harry picked up his school bag and hurried out of the classroom feeling cold and a bit scared. He hadn't lost control of his magic, just his mind. Harry knew he should go straight to Dumbledore and perhaps he would have if he hadn't been in such deep despair. Instead Harry made a promise to himself to practice occlumency every night before he went to sleep and if something like this happened again then he would go to the headmaster.

Although Snape never commented about his rush up to check on Harry after the runespoor had vanished from the Slytherin's quarters,

Harry could tell the incident irritated the man. The constant stopping in mid-sentence to cut off snide remarks was uncharacteristic of the potion master. Harry hated the sessions more than ever since anytime he let his mind wandered it always went to Ginny.

So when Snape interrupted his recitation one night, Harry answered crossly. "What?"

"What did you just say Potter?" Snape snapped again.

"About what?" Harry shot back and hissed at Hapa to hold up.

"Have her go back and read that last paragraph again." Snape said irritability.

"She doesn't like going back." Harry said between his teeth. Hapa hissed angrily at him when he insisted. "Please Hapa let's just humor the git okay?" He rubbed his scar and sighed.

"Very well, Master." Hapa touched his hand then looked back at the book.

"Among many magical artifacts I have recovered in Burkina Faso was an unmarked potion. I believe it to be the snake speech potion of so many old tales. I have included it along with other marked drafts. I am unsure about one ingredient and am reluctant to include it with this list. The manuscript I copied the potion from, records three hairs from a muggle born parselmouth to be added before drinking as the final component. Since no such parselmouth exists...."

"Stop Potter." Snape dropped his quill to the desk and stood up rubbing his neck. "The potion I am brewing is worthless." He paced in frustration.

"My mother was a muggle born parselmouth." Harry said quietly.

"Unfortunately she is not here." Snape said without snapping to Harry's surprise.

"But what if there are others we don't know about. I mean how many people go around talking to snakes if they don't think they can?" Harry wondered if that came out coherent.

"It would take some time to find someone and then make them understand what we wanted of them." Snape said disappointed. He gazed at a door to his private lab. "Only four weeks to go too." He said wistfully.

"Don't stop with it." Harry blurted out. "We'll figure out something."

"I will complete the mixture since it will store indefinitely and since I have brewed it thus far." Snape sighed. "But I see very little hope to find three hairs from a muggle born parselmouth."

The headmaster was sympathetic about the problem with the snake speech potion. But Dumbledore was more concerned about Harry's physical and mental state. "I have told Madam Pomfrey to increase the potency of your strengthening solution and while this may help Harry, you need to take better care of yourself."

"I'm..." Harry started.

"If you try to tell me you are fine, I'll hex your shorts into slugs." Dumbledore's threat was softened by the humor in it and Harry gave him a slight smile. "I am quite serious young man." The old wizard admonished gently.

"I don't know what to do." Harry said swallowing hard. "It still hurts so much."

"Give Ginny some space Harry." Dumbledore knew he wasn't speaking of his scar. "She has her own destiny to pursue." Harry's eyes snapped open.

"Do you mean she has a prophecy about her too?" Harry felt a sinking feeling come over him.

"I did not say prophecy. I said destiny. Everyone has one. It is not set in stone but it is unique to each person and very personal." Dumbledore explained.

"You don't think her destiny is with me." Harry said softly.

"Perhaps not but more, perhaps not right now." Dumbledore said firmly.

"I feel like a part of me is missing." Harry met the old wizard's brilliant blue eyes. "Like my heart is missing."

"I'm afraid that is the way love feels sometimes." Dumbledore said sympathetically. "You were friends with her before, don't let your love for her ruin your friendship."

"She won't even stay in the common room when I'm there." Harry agonized. "How can I be her friend if she can't stand to be near me?"

"Give her time Harry." Dumbledore insisted. "I know it's hard but time is what she needs."

"The thing is do I have time?" Harry gazed at the headmaster waiting for him to argue this logic.

"That remains to be seen." Dumbledore surprised Harry by the admission of knowing he was referring to his prophecy. "But that is a question nobody really knows so one must do the best with the time available to us."

Harry knew what the headmaster had said was true. He knew Ginny need time. He knew he should eat better, even he had noticed he had lost weight. But Harry also knew that the pain did not ease nor did his apathy. By the end of March Harry's finally blow was losing the ability to change into his phoenix form. He felt ashamed and weak for letting this affect him so badly.

Voldemort took full advantage of Harry's disadvantage and pressed him constantly. He never entering his mind like he had done in Snape's office nor speaking a spell through him but Harry felt an ever persistent presence that would cause him to pause in thought or movement.

Finally weeks of pain and sadness caused by a broken heart shattered all of Harry's strength to hold Voldemort off from entering his mind. And as Harry, Ron and Hermione walked down to dinner on the last day of March a will not his own forced Harry's legs to move faster and faster.

"Hey Harry. What's the hurry?" Ron's voice called after him.

Voldemort made him stop in the entrance hall. Swaying on his feet, Harry tried to fight the excruciating pain in his scar. He felt his arm lift his wand. "Accio runespoor shield." Harry jaws jerked as the words were forced from him.

"Harry?" Hermione and Ron stopped beside him but jumped back when the carved wooden shield flew down the stairs from Gryffindor Tower.

With no power to stop himself Harry caught the ancient shield and slipped it onto his left arm. Suddenly the runespoor appeared, hissing and undulating her coils at Harry's shield side. "Follow." Voldemort hissed at her as he used Harry once again and ran into the great hall.

Screams rang in the hall as the runespoor poured her coils along the lines of house tables. Voldemort stopped half way down the middle aisle. "Ah Dumbledore. The very person I was looking to find." McGonagall, Flitwick and Malahide were on their feet, their wands drawn.

"Let Harry go Tom." Dumbledore said firmly as he stood. Even in his agony Harry saw anger and fear in the old wizard's face.

"Why would I let him go?" Voldemort forced a laugh from Harry. "It took me so long to get him." Harry's arm rose and pointed at the

students rushing to leave the hall. "Nobody leaves." The great hall doors slammed shut.

Harry saw Ron and Hermione standing behind him when Voldemort had turned to close the doors. A warm feeling from knowing his friends were near by filtered through the coldness that had settled on his body since Voldemort's intrusion. But as the dark lord was so skilled at doing he twisted the image of his friends into one of Harry murdering Ron and Hermione. Fear replaced the hope of having his friends near him.

While his back was turned Malahide shot stunning spells at Voldemort but they bounced off the shield, one returning on its path and stunning the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Malahide crumpled onto the head table. Slowly Voldemort made Harry face Dumbledore again.

"You know there is only one spell this shield can not deflect." Harry's arm rose once again and pointed at Dumbledore. With all the strength left in him, Harry struggled to keep his lips from moving but the pain was too much. Voldemort cried. "Avada Kedavra." A jet of bright green light and the sound of rushing death leaped from Harry's wand straight at Dumbledore.

Author's notes: Thanks for the reviews!!!

First sorry, to end it here but this chapter was getting kind of long. And I hadn't had a cliffy for so long...evil grin-----running to hide.

Time?

Time goes, you say? Ah, no! Alas, Time stays, we go.

Austin Dobson

The mistake isn't:

Neville's birthday. I found out after I had written that his was the 30th but being so close I didn't think it was so ill-conceived that their parents would celebrate together.

No godmother. Again I found this out after I had written one in but Alice Longbottom is hardly a 'real godmother' being how she's mentally gone, so that isn't it.

Harry's patronus is a stag not his animagus form.

If Hermione's parents take a magical port key into the castle I pretty sure they could see it.

Mark Evens being at Hogwarts, I guess I should have read more of JK's interviews. But that isn't the mistake I'm talking about.

Clue for the mistake is: It occurs after Chapter 25.

Chapter 47

A pure clear tone rang through the great hall. Out of a flash of fire Fawkes the phoenix appeared and swallowed the green light then he burst into flames. A small naked baby bird fell to the table in front of Dumbledore. Several students sent stunning spell at Harry but they merely glanced off the shield.

"You have only one phoenix Dumbledore. And you can not disapparate out of the path of death in this castle." Once again Harry fought an inner battle to take back control of his own body but as before Voldemort proved stronger. "Avada Kedavra." The green light rushed toward Dumbledore but a large figure from his left jumped in front of the headmaster and took the spell. Malahide crumpled onto the table then rolled to the floor.

More screams echoed around Harry. "Kill me Dumbledore or more people will die." Voldemort said. The runespoor swelled and hissed at anyone coming near. Harry was vaguely aware of many members of the D.A. standing just outside the serpents strike range.

"I will not kill Harry for you." Dumbledore said grimly.

"Then he will see everyone in this great hall perish. Because no spell, save one will penetrate the shield's power." Voldemort forced Harry to speak then his wand rose. "Crucio." Even Dumbledore was not immune to the unforgivable curse but if the old wizard screamed Harry couldn't hear over the students' shouts and various curses sent at him. The spells bounced off the shield's protective aura. Several students collapsed as the hexes hit them instead.

The pain on the old face could not be covered by the roar of the people around him. Dumbledore fell forward onto the table and writhed in pain. "Does Potter's death seem a bit closer old fool?" Voldemort stopped the curse. Not on his own accord but because Harry had found a surge of strength to resist him. But it didn't last.

Slowly Dumbledore raised himself. He shrugged off McGonagall's help and slowly stood erect once again, his blue eyes blazing. "I will not kill Harry for you."

"Then die Dumbledore and hope someone is here at hand that has the power and courage to stop the slaughter that is about to begin." Voldemort pointed Harry's wand at the headmaster but forced Harry around when the great hall's doors shattered.

Robes billowing as he ran into the hall, Snape stopped ten paces from Harry. "Severus." Voldemort said almost hungrily. "I did hope I would see you again."

Snape stared into Harry's eyes. Harry saw him tense for what ever Voldemort would send at him but just as Harry was forced to raise his wand arm again, a heavy blow from behind knocked him to his knees. Falling forward, Harry's wand clattered out of his hand across the stone floor to Snape's feet and the pale wizard picked it up. The runespoor hissed angrily.

Quickly Harry was forced to his feet by Voldemort whose rage made his scar sear. How long could this pain continue Harry wondered? His body could only stand so much. Through the haze of pain, he saw Neville rise from the floor behind him.

"You shall pay for that boy." Voldemort hissed at Neville. "It makes no difference. I have other means of inflicting death." Despite his casual manner Harry knew the dark lord was shaken by this turn of events but the confusion was short lived. "One of the runespoor's set of fangs contains a deadly poison."

With a surge of supremacy and domination, Voldemort spoke to the runespoor. "I command you, runespoor of the shield, to teach death to all in this room." The horror of his order struck Harry as the serpent turned each head to face him. Its three heads snaking at Harry's eye level. When the runespoor merely flicked its three tongues out and stared, Voldemort raged again. "Bite I command thee."

If a serpent could do anything that would be call laughing, Harry herd Giza's and Hapa's smirking chuckle. "Thou art not our master even though thou speaks through him." Hapa spat.

"I would not bite the boy even if you were. " Giza rubbed her head across Harry's cheek. "We are fond of this master and wish no harm to him."

"I possess the shield! I am the master!" Voldemort's anger rose. Harry felt the agony of hot pain. Then someone on either side of him took his arms. The familiar presence of Ron and Hermione eased Harry's torment.

Kesho weaved forward and gave an angry hiss. "Listen to me Master of Nothing." She spat.

"Count the days

Of yet to come

Thee of evil ways

The shield will hum

The battle will rage

And all the earth

Will be ablaze

Then tears of mirth

Will start to shed

Dark master of death

A beam blood red

Steals thy last breath."

A great fear filled Voldemort blinding Harry with pain then a soft hand touched his forehead. "Leave Harry alone." Ginny cried. All the love Harry ever knew washed over him in those words. He felt it rush into him with a power stronger than anything he had ever known.

The emotion proved too much for the dark wizard. The shield dropped to the floor and Harry collapsed as Voldemort fled his mind.

Calls of "Harry" rang in his ears but the only voice he concentrated on belonged to the cool gentle hand on his scar. "It's okay Harry. I'm here."

"Ginny?" Harry opened his eyes with great effort. A tear dropped on to his cheek and a freckled nose touched his. A light kiss brushed his lips before stronger arms replaced Ron's and Hermione's.

"Let's get him to the hospital wing." Dumbledore said. "Severus would you see to runespoor? See if you can convince her to take the shield down to your quarters." Harry felt his body rise, floating, his head echoing words.

"Yes, Headmaster. What of Malahide? " Snape voice seemed miles away as Harry drifted into unconsciousness.

For a long time Harry didn't even try to wake up to the persistent voices around him. Any time he had a thought to wake his brain, which felt a bit bruised, convinced him it was much easier to slip back into the painless void.

The hour was late by the fall of the moon light on the floor of the infirmary when Harry finally opened his eyes and put on his glasses which he found on the bedside table. To his surprise he was alone. The chairs sat empty beside his bed. Or were they? A light gasp came from the one on his left and Ginny's face appeared out of no where.

"Harry!" Ginny flung her arms around him and kissed his face repeatedly. Harry finally calmed her enough to linger on her lips and he tasted her salty tears.

"Ginny." Harry couldn't believe she was here, out after curfew and kissing him.

"I'm so sorry Harry." Ginny buried her face in his shoulder and sobbed. "I was so stupid."

"Don't cry Ginny." Harry sat up and took her in his arms. "Do you really like me again?"

"I never stopped liking you." Ginny sniffed tightening her hold on him.

"I don't understand why you broke up with me." Harry pulled her off his neck. "What was going on?" Ginny looked worried and stared at her hands.'

"I've been such a drag on you. A wreck every time I came back from St. Mungo's." Ginny fiddled with the blanket's hem. "Then last week I saw you talking and laughing with Lavender and Parvati. I just thought, "Ginny gave a little hiccup. "That you need laughter in your life more than you need me crying on your shoulder all the time."

"But I want to be needed by you Ginny." Harry took her hands. "If I only lean on you that wouldn't be fair. And it would get old after a while don't you think?" Harry made her look at him. "We have to be able to count on each other and not have it just one sided."

"I know you're right but when I saw you with Lavender and Parvati." Ginny looked worried again. "You were all laughing and you looked so happy and I thought maybe you wanted to see someone else." Her voice trailed off.

"I'll tell you what we were talking about." Harry laughed. Parvati asked me to save a dance for her at the next ball." A flash in Ginny's eyes made Harry laugh again. "I told her I didn't know a lot about having a girlfriend but I was pretty sure I would have to ask you if it would be all right to dance with her." Ginny burst out laughing through her tears.

"That's exactly what those two did." Harry grinned and gazed at her taking in every detail of her face as if he had forgotten what she looked like.

"I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions." Ginny sniffed. "I've been just so messed up with St. Mungo's and everything."

"I need you Ginny." Harry wiped the tears from her cheeks. He swallowed hard. "I...I love you." Harry whispered then repeated it louder. "I love you Ginny."

"Harry." Ginny wrapped her arms around his neck and he fell back against the pillow pulling her beside him. Putting her nose against his, Ginny gazed into his eyes. "I love you too Harry." His hands slipped through her hair and Harry kissed her deeply. Shifting over for Ginny to lay with him in the narrow hospital bed, Harry for a short time thought of nothing but their frantically beating hearts.

As they paused to catch their breath Harry whispered. "Your dad told me I'd have to be the strong one."

"Oh?" Ginny's voice chilled. "Let me tell you Harry Potter. I love you very much but I'm not ready for that yet. Understood?"

"Yes ma'am." Harry stifled a laugh. She sounded so much like her mother. "Just tell me you love me again." His voice cracked. "You are the first person who has ever said those words to me."

Ginny buried her face in Harry's neck again. Her shoulders shook. Harry thought she might be crying. "Ginny I love you."

"Am I the first you ever said that to?" Ginny lifted her head to look at him, her face puffy and her eyes red.

"Yeah." Harry whispered.

"I love you Harry." Ginny said nestling in his arms again.

"This feels so good." Harry sighed. "A lot better medicine than any of Pomfrey's potions."

"I should hope so." Ginny sighed then added in a whisper. "I feel like I'm whole again."

"I know what you are saying." Harry nodded bumping his chin on the top of her head. They lay together for a long time without speaking just enjoying the feeling of closeness between them. Harry watched the moonlight move across the floor and the sky began to lighten.

"I think I better go." Ginny rose up. She kissed him and reluctantly slid out of bed then picked up the invisibility cloak that had dropped to the floor.

"Is that mine?" Harry asked.

"Who else do I know with an invisibility cloak?" Ginny grinned. "I persuaded Ron to get it for me."

"How did you manage that?" Harry laughed as Ginny swung the cloak around her.

"I have six older brothers." Ginny gave him a sly look and her eyes danced. "Don't you think by now I know who to get what I want from each of them? With Ron all I have to do is tear up just a bit. If I start to blubber he gets numb to it but a little heart felt weeping and he's mush."

Laughing Harry paused to consider. "I wonder if that would work for me?"

"It might." Ginny giggled then sighed. "I better go." She leaned over and gave him a kiss. It was a bit strange kissing a floating head but Harry found he could adapt. Then she pulled the cloak over her head and whispered. "I love you Harry."

"I love you too." Harry called softly, thinking his heart might explode with the feeling he had for Ginny. He had just closed his eyes to bask in the feeling Ginny had left behind when he heard a quiet voice from the shadow near the door.

"That is what you needed to hear from me. Isn't it Harry?" Dumbledore stepped into the moon light his burnished gold robes shimmering. "What Ginny just told you?"

"Uh?" Harry felt his face turn hot. Had Dumbledore heard everything Ginny and he had said?

"On the astronomy tower and the night you forgave me." Dumbledore stared at Harry looking sad and guilty. "When Sirius died, you didn't need only explanations, you needed to feel loved and cared about by someone." The old wizard dropped his gaze and sighed.

"Professor don't." Harry didn't want Dumbledore to think he was obligated to say what Ginny had.

As if reading his mind Dumbledore said. "If I were to echo Ginny's words the true feelings I have for you would get lost in the appearance of correctness." Harry looked at him puzzled.

"Dear boy. Young man I should say now." Dumbledore smiled slightly. "You are my heart and soul walking around outside my body." His blue eyes grew misty. Harry didn't know what to say. "You remind me of my son at times. Perhaps more of a grandson I never had."

"Can I call you Gramps?" Harry quipped trying to lighten the headmaster's mood.

Dumbledore chuckled but abruptly sobered and looked at him over his half-moon glasses. "No, you may not." His eyes twinkled as Harry laughed.

"How long had you known Ginny was here?" Harry wondered what the headmaster had seen and heard.

"Oh I knew Ginny arrived here long before you awoke. I've been checking off and on to see if Ginny had left." If possible the glimmer in Dumbledore's eyes grew brighter when Harry's blush deepened. He sat down close to Harry's bed and the old wizard added seriously. "You needed her. Not her empathic touch, you needed her love for you."

"I did." Harry swallowed hard and gazed at the headmaster. "I feel like my heart is back."

Dumbledore was nodding. "True love often has that affect. You are lucky to have found it so young."

"Is it lucky for Ginny?" Harry dropped his head back to the pillow and sighed.

"Do not underestimate Ginny Weasley." Dumbledore cautioned. "She has a strength I'm sure you have felt."

"Yeah I have." Harry still looked worried. "I'm afraid I'll suck it out of her. Maybe she was better off staying away from me."

"Ginny thought in distancing herself from you, who gave her sympathy of what she was experiencing at St. Mungo's that she would be able to have a more clinical manner in dealing with healing. She didn't understand empathic healing is feeling. Not pain but great empathy and putting her heart on the line." Dumbledore said.

"I don't understand. That doesn't make sense. Why would that cause her to push me away?" Harry frowned.

"Oh, as the only girl and 'baby' of the family it makes perfect sense." Dumbledore countered. "For the first time Ginny has something that no one, not her parents, not any of her brothers, nor even I can help her with, or do for her. Empathic healing." The old wizard paused thoughtfully.

"Even though little is known on how empathic healing works, it is certain feelings play a huge part in the healing process. Ginny is only fourteen and despite her external confidence she has all the insecurities of a teenage girl having to grow up much faster than normal with the responsibilities her abilities have placed upon her." Dumbledore explained. "In her rush to please her parents so she could still go to St. Mungo's Ginny forgot to live for today. So do not deny her the prerogative to share her energy with you. It is what makes an empath stronger, sharing."

"I didn't know that." Harry glanced at the old wizard sharply then stared back to the ceiling and closed his eyes.

"How do you feel?" Dumbledore asked.

"I'm okay." Harry answered without opening his eyes.

I know you are okay. But how do you feel?" Dumbledore repeated.

"I don't know." Harry knew the headmaster wasn't talking about his feelings about Ginny. "Relieved I guess." Harry ran his hand through his hair. "Relieved no one got hurt."

"I'm afraid, Harry." Dumbledore said gently. "Someone did get hurt."

"Oh yeah, Voldemort used the cruciatus curse on you." Harry studied the old wizard for a moment. He seemed fine.

"Professor Malahide is dead, Harry." Dumbledore said quickly.

"I...saw...him stunned then." Harry blinked and the cold chill realization set in. "He took the curse...for you." Harry went pale and could barely squeeze out the words. "I killed him."

"You did not kill him Harry." Dumbledore said firmly. "Voldemort killed Malahide."

Harry's brow furrowed. He had killed someone. "I bet the ministry won't see it that clearly." He met Dumbledore's eyes; there was no glimmer in them now.

"No but the situation is different then last year Harry." Dumbledore said. "We will have to present your case. However this year our credibility is more substantial."

"Did Malahide have a family?" Harry asked bracing himself.

"A muggle wife and three grown muggle children." Dumbledore replied solemnly. "He was muggle born from a family with a strong military background which reflected in his teaching methods."

"If they need anything." Harry blinked hard. "I want to help."

"As do I." Dumbledore said firmly. "He gave his life to protect me."

Desperate to talk about something else Harry searched through his mind. "Where is the runespoor? And the shield? I was surprised anyone could touch me when I wore it." When Dumbledore didn't answer right away Harry closed his eyes again. Had the runespoor bit someone?"

"The runespoor and shield has vanished Harry." The headmaster said pushing Harry back down on the bed as he sprang up.

"Gone! Where did she go?" Harry tried to sit up again. "We have to find her."

"I was hoping you might be able to tell us where she had gone." Dumbledore said. "Professor Snape persuaded her to take the shield to his quarter but after the third day."

"Third day?" Harry repeated. "How long have I been here?"

"This is the beginning of the sixth day you have been in the hospital wing." Dumbledore said. "As I was saying after the third day in Professor Snape's quarter, he said the runespoor seemed agitated then he saw her and the shield disappear."

Harry felt heartsick. He would miss the quick sharp tongues of Hapa and Giza. He rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"You should get some more rest. Madam Pomfrey will no doubt be in to give you a strengthening potion." Dumbledore told him.

His mind was still on the runespoor. He would miss the thoughtful provoking words of Kesho. Harry sighed then his eyes snapped open. "Professor! Kesho told Voldemort something that scared him." Harry tried his best to repeat the rhyme the runespoor had said but knew it wasn't quite right.

"Interesting." Dumbledore said deep in thought.

"Professor, you could you recall the memory for me couldn't you?"
Harry was sure it was important.

"Yes, I could but another time Harry. We will talk later." Dumbledore stood. "Get some rest." The headmaster patted Harry's shoulder and strode from the room.

Yawning again Harry tried over and over to remember what Kesho had said but Malahide's leap in front of Dumbledore kept intruding along with the word murderer.

Author's Notes; WOW! Reviews...mental note: nasty evil cliffies gets lots of reviews.

Short chapter but I was afraid I would bet hunted down and strung up like a Christmas goose if I made you wait longer. You really didn't think I would kill off Dumbledore like that?

I know all who like Harry and Ginny pairings will be happy, those who don't...Oh well I can't please everybody all the time.

Chapter 48

The next day when Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Neville came to see him, Harry felt much like he had when Dumbledore had first told him of the prophecy, isolated and different. By his hand someone had died. And even though Dumbledore assured him it wasn't his fault Harry felt like it was. But he managed to smile at Ron's jokes and looked interested when Hermione told him of the different rumors running through the school.

"Even after Dumbledore told the whole school what had happened to you, people still are making up things." Hermione said angrily.

"Malfoy most likely." Ron scowled then brightened. "Hey Harry did anyone tell you? Neville has pretty much won the house cup for Gryffindor with the five hundred points Dumbledore gave him." Neville ducked his head and blushed. "And he's getting a special award for services to the school."

"You deserve it Neville." Harry said firmly. "And much more."

"My Gran sent a howler." Neville flushed a little more. "But this time she shouted to the whole school how proud she was of me." His eyes grew misty but he quickly wiped them and added. "But what Snape said was the most surprising of all."

"What did he say?" Harry asked. Although he remembered what happened, details were blurry because to get to a particular point Harry had to recall the complete memory. Something he was trying to avoid.

"That greasy git should have been on his knees kissing the hem of your robes Neville." Ron said hotly. "You saved his miserable life."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that." Neville's face flushed again.

"You did Neville. You know you did." Ginny insisted.

"But what did Snape say?" Harry looked back and forth to the three of them.

"All he said was, 'About time Longbottom.'" Hermione answered crossly.

"What?" Harry looked puzzled.

"He said a bit more Hermione." Neville said. "I asked him 'what?' too. And Snape just stared at me, you know how he does, then he said, 'It's about time you did something right Longbottom.'"

"I think that's as close to a thank you and compliment as you'll get from Snape, Neville." Harry snorted. "I'm impressed." Neville shrugged as if it didn't matter but Harry saw more confidence in the round face and Neville even seemed to be sitting straighter, taller.

"So, have Dumbledore and you worked out your defense for the trial?" Ginny asked

"Mostly." Harry said not looking at her. Harry couldn't fool Ginny. She knew just from holding his hand something was up with him. The truth was Dumbledore and Harry did not see eye to eye on the trial and a long heated argument had taken place just that morning.

"They should allow you more time." Hermione said defensively. "You aren't even out of the hospital wing."

"The reason I'm not out of here Hermione, is because I'm dangerous." Harry said flatly.

Hermione blinked, trying to figure out what he meant then her eyes flashed and she sputtered. "You mean you're being held here? Like imprisoned?"

"More like detained." Harry shrugged. He understood the Ministry position and didn't mind not going back to the dorm. In fact he was a worried. How would Dean and Seamus treat him? Or what if he hurt Ron, Dean, Neville or Seamus? Harry sighed. "It doesn't matter Hermione. It will all be over with tomorrow."

Lingering after Ron, Hermione and Neville had left, Ginny tried to get Harry to talk about the upcoming hearing. "You're doing it again."

"What?" Harry squeezed her hand. It took all the will he had to touch her hand. Harry had this strange feeling, even though he knew it wasn't true that, he would taint Ginny by just touching her.

"You've closed and locked your feelings away." Ginny said sadly.

"I know." Harry met her eyes. "I'm just not ready."

"I know that too." Ginny kissed his forehead then lightly brushed his lips with hers. "Get some rest. I'm not saying sleep because I know better." She gave him a hug. "Good-night."

"Night." Harry echoed as her fingers slipped out of his hand. He watched her leave the infirmary and listened to the door shut. Would that be the last time he saw her? Harry wondered. What was the punishment for murder in the wizarding world? Harry didn't know. Trying to shift his mind from the trial Harry attempted to recall what Kesho had said to Voldemort. How had she been able to disobey Voldemort? Where was she now?

Dumbledore had cautioned Harry about thinking too much of the missing runespoor. That Voldemort need not know the shield was out of Harry's possession. But the dark wizard had been very quiet since possessing him. So quiet Harry only felt a slight stretchy feeling around his scar instead of the dull ache that had been ever present for so long.

Sighing he reached for a glass of water on his bedside table. His hand paused as Harry stared at his wand. Slowly Harry picked up the glass and took a sip, still gazing at the holly wand. Not since Voldemort had possessed him had Harry touched his wand. Harry sipped his water with his eyes still fixated on the wooden stick.

It wasn't that Harry resented the wand but more so was afraid. Afraid it had been changed by the dark spells that had been forced from it. Shaking his head, Harry forced his eyes away from the wand. He was being ridiculous, Harry berated himself. Steeling himself, Harry set

down the glass on the stand then wiped his hand on his pajamas. In one smooth movement before he could talk himself out of it, Harry picked up his wand and gave it a wave much like he had when he first taken it from Mr. Oleanders almost seven years ago.

Red and gold sparks flew out of the tip of the wand and Harry gave a sigh of relief. Those little sparks were the first magic Harry had done since.... He closed his eyes and lay back against his pillow. Like when Sirius had died, the possession of his body by Voldemort would be a marker of time, of things that had happened before or after it. Absentmindedly Harry fingered his wand then stared at it again. Did it feel different? Or was it just him? Then a thought struck Harry and a cold chill crept inside him.

Checking to make sure Madam Pomfrey was in her office, Harry slid out of bed and moved quietly to the row of tall windows. After a quick search around the first frame, Harry went to the next window to hunt. There, crawling along the glass was a tiny spider. A flash of Mad-eye Moody demonstrating curses on three hapless spiders came to Harry as he said. "Engorgio." The spider grew to the size of a sickle. Harry took a deep breath and with a firm voice said. "Imperio."

The spider froze in place. Without really knowing how he knew, Harry forced the spider to do cartwheels and roll around on the window sill. Grimly Harry lifted his wand then pointed it at the frantic spider and said. "Reducio." Slowly Harry walked back to the bed not feeling the cold stone floor on his bare feet. After he had gotten into bed, Harry set his wand back on the stand then lay down staring at the ceiling.

It wasn't the wand that had changed Harry realized. By using Harry to cast the unforgivable curses Voldemort, certainly without intending to, had, not given him power as he had when Harry was a baby, but instead had taught Harry how to use the dark spells.

When Harry awoke he found a pile of clean clothes and his best set of school robes sitting on the chair by his bed. Just as he was about to put on his Hogwarts robes Dumbledore entered, wearing the plum colored robes of the Wizengamot. "Good Morning Harry. Good I see

you are almost dressed.” The old wizard sounded strange to Harry and he looked up at the bearded face. There was a grimness Harry rarely saw in the blue eyes.

“I was thinking maybe I should wear dress robes. I have a dark maroon set.” Harry said picking a piece of lint off the black robes.

“No, I think it best to remind the panel that you are a student.” Dumbledore replied and took a deep breath. “As for your trial Harry, as your appointed guardian here in the wizarding world, I insisted you do as I say in this matter.”

Harry took his time in answering by fastening his robes. “How can you be on the jury when you are my guardian? Isn’t that a conflict of interest?”

“I may run the proceedings and may enter into the discussion but I will not be allowed to vote.” Dumbledore told him. “But deflecting my request does not make me forget it Harry.”

“I wasn’t trying to.” Harry said tiredly then asked. “How are we getting there?”

“We will travel by floo powder. I mean what I say Harry.” Dumbledore said sternly.

“As did I.” Harry answered quietly to the floor. He felt the old wizard’s long hands on his shoulders and looked up into a concerned lined face. Harry appreciated the headmaster’s caring but he didn’t want to get into this debate again. “Don’t you think it’s time to go?” Harry glanced at the sun, now shining brightly through the windows.

“Yes,” Dumbledore dropped his hands resignedly. “We will use Madam Pomfrey’s fireplace.” The headmaster turned and walked to the nurse’s office and knocked lightly then opened the door and gestured for Harry to enter.

A few moments later Harry was spinning out of the row of fireplaces in the atrium at the Ministry of Magic headquarters. The first thing Harry noticed was the statue of magical brethren had not been

replaced. A simple flow in the middle of the fountain spurted the water up an only a few feet before it fell back noisily into the pool. A hand on his back made Harry jump.

“Sorry Harry. I didn’t mean to startle you.” Mr. Weasley patted his shoulder then Harry was engulfed in a hug by Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh Harry this is so dreadful.” Mrs. Weasley let him go and dabbed at her eyes with a purple handkerchief.

“We thought we come down to give you some moral support.” Remus gripped Harry’s shoulder. “Even though we can’t go into the trial with you.”

“Thanks. I think I’ll need it.” Harry nodded to the three of them. Then Dumbledore stepped out of the fireplace.

“We should go down to the courtroom.” The old wizard led the way to the lifts. One clanged opened and they all stepped into it. Mr. Weasley pushed the button for the ninth floor and the gate slid shut with a bang and the lift shuddered as it slowly descended. When it reached the ninth floor the lift jerked to a stop and the doors creaked open. As Harry walked down the steps to the tenth floor he recalled rushing down them with Mr. Weasley. That seemed so long ago.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley stopped outside the court room door. Mrs. Weasley started fussing with Harry’s robes, straightening them and brushing off invisible dirt. Lupin stepped up beside Harry. Remus once again put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Listen to Dumbledore Harry. Please. Promise me?”

“I have listened to him.” Harry said firmly turning away from Lupin. “Don’t you think we should go in now? Let’s get this over with.” He said to Dumbledore. The headmaster looking sad and worried nodded. Harry pulled open the thick door and went inside followed by Dumbledore.

The dungeon courtroom was as Harry remembered, the dark stone walls and tiers of benches rising into the darkness past the light of the torches. Harry glanced at the faces watching him walk to the chair

with chains in the middle of the proceedings. As he stopped in front of the chair Harry swallowed hard and turned to face the witches and wizards staring at him. It was almost two years since he had stood in this same spot, fearing he may never go back to Hogwarts. So much had happen since that day and Harry knew he was a different person today. This time Harry gazed back at the assembly unwavering, he was nervous but not afraid.

The Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge sat with Amelia Bones in the same seats they had been in previous year. Fudge gave Harry a look he couldn't interrupt. Harry didn't know how Fudge felt about him this year. Would the Minister be on Harry's side or still want him out of Hogwarts?'

To Fudge's right was a old wizard with sparse red hair with patches of snowy white at his temples and a square jaw with deep set eyes, Harry thought immediately of Malahide but knew he could be no relation. Malahide was muggle born although Dumbledore hadn't mentioned any brothers or sisters.

The Minister of Magic stood up. "I think we should begin." He said gravely. "Dumbledore, the Wizengamot has discussed this matter and since you are the guardian of the accused we feel someone else should handle the proceedings." Fudge announced pompously then added hastily. "Though your opinions and wisdom are at all times welcome."

"I have no objections to that." Dumbledore bow slightly. He turned and conjured a chintz chair and sat down. Slowly Harry sank into the seat with the chains. Once again the metal chains rattled but did not bind Harry to the chair.

"Criminal hearing of Harry James Potter on the eighth of April, interrogators Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Amelia Bones and Tiberious Ogden." Fudge stated. "Witness for the defense Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

"Harry James Potter, you are charged with being an accomplice to the murder of Roger Malahide, of using unforgivable curses on a

human being and threatening the lives of others.” Fudge paused for a breath. “How do you plead?”

He felt Dumbledore touch his arm slightly in warning but in a firm voice Harry answered. “Guilty.” A gasp issued from the jury and echoed slightly followed by a rising whispering. Fudge’s mouth dropped open. The Minister had clearly not expected this.

“I beg your pardon?” Madam Bones leaned forward, her monocle dropped from her eye on to her lap. “Did you say ‘guilty’?”

“Yes.” Harry gave a short nod.

“As court appointed guardian for Harry,” Dumbledore’s voice silenced the court room. “I enter a plea of ‘not guilty’.”

“But as you know Dumbledore, the plea must come from the accused.” Fudge was glancing back and forth to Harry and the old wizard.

“I know.” Dumbledore said in a soft worried voice.

“Surely Harry you miss spoke.” Fudge said anxiously. “Just say it again for the record.”

“Guilty.” Harry repeated and the muttering started again.

“Harry, you can’t be serious.” Fudge seemed almost frantic. “If you plead guilty we have no choice but to sentence you.”

For a moment Harry gazed at the portly man. “You didn’t have a problem with that the other time I was here.” Fudge face went red and before he could answer Harry said again. “I plead guilty as charged.”

There was deafening silence in the room now. Fudge didn’t seem to know what to say. Madam Bones gazed at Harry and said. “You know we must sentence you?”

“Yes.” Harry nodded his resolve still holding his emotions in check. “I understand that I can say a word on my behalf before sentencing?”

"By all means, proceed." Madam Bones picked up the monocle from her lap and adjusted in front of her eye.

Taking a deep breath Harry stood up and gazed at the wizards and witches watching him so intently. Harry gave a quick glance at Dumbledore then took another breath and said. "I was told to plead 'not guilty' today. That I wasn't at fault for the death of Professor Malahide." His voice choked. "It was Voldemort who controlled my actions." A gasp ran through the assembly at the dark wizard's name. "But it was still my hand that held the wand and for this I accept the blame."

"But you had no control over that." Dumbledore inserted.

"I should have." Harry said furiously. He took a moment to control his voice then said. "I allowed myself to become vulnerable to his influence and Malahide paid with his life." Harry blinked hard and continued in a small voice. "It could have been anyone or everyone in the great hall. I can't let that happen again. So I deserve whatever punishment that is fitting for such a crime." Harry sank back into the chair and waited.

He looked up when a witch in the darkness spoke. "What do you think we should do?" Harry recognized the quaver voice of Griselda Marchbanks.

"I honestly don't know." Harry sighed and dropped his head to gaze at the stone floor. "I had hoped wiser wizards and witches than I could figure out what to do with me, so I don't hurt anyone else."

"But you can not expect to be punished for things you may or may not do in the future." Dumbledore pointed out.

Harry shrugged then lifting his head to the assembly again said. "I will say this; I will try with all my power to keep this from happening again."

"Just what caused you to become vulnerable?" The wizard beside Fudge asked.

With a blush rising in his cheeks Harry stuttered. "Uh well, actually I was doing alright resisting Voldemort." The crowd flinched and gasped at the name again but Harry ignored it. "I could rest when I changed into my animagus form. But when my girlfriend broke up with me," The flush on his face deepened as a quiet sound of sympathy rippled through the members. "Well, I was a bit depressed."

"That explains it." The wizard said knowingly then he turned to the others. "I do think we need to take in account his age and experience or I should say lack of experience." A mummer of agreement went around the assembly.

"Do you have anything further to say?" Fudge asked Harry.

Considering Harry shook his head. "No, I think I said all I needed you to hear."

"We will then discuss your sentencing." Fudge said. Dumbledore stood up and strode over to the rows of witches and wizards. The whispering buzzed in Harry's head. Several times Harry saw Dumbledore shake his head in obvious disagreement to the discussion. The debate continued. Harry could tell by following the direction of the jury's gaze that Dumbledore, Fudge and the wizard beside him were the ones with the main contentions. Harry still wasn't sure if Fudge was on his side or not, although the Minister did seem a little kinder to him than last year. Harry closed his eyes wishing they would just decide. As if they had heard his silent plea Fudge cleared his throat.

"The Wizengamot has reached a decision. Harry James Potter for the crimes you have freely admitted your guilt, it is the decision of this court to sentence you to ten years of solitary confinement." Although Harry had braced himself for the worst he found his breath had left him and the walls of the dungeon seemed threateningly close. Ten years! His mind flashed with images of what Ron and Hermione would look like in ten years. He saw Ron with a mustache and goatee, Hermione's wild bushy hair, shorter and under control. Then he saw an image of a child with bright red hair on Hermione's hip and Harry almost smiled. But his mental pictures crumbled when he thought of

Ginny. How could he ask her to wait for him? Would all of them still be alive with Voldemort on the loose? Then he heard Fudge speak again.

“Nine years and eleven months of the sentence are suspended.” Harry felt his lungs fill with air. A month? He had spent longer in the cupboard under the stairs at the Dursleys’ than that. Fudge continued. “After you have successfully served your required time with no sign of You-Know-Who intruding upon you, you will be placed on probation and allowed to return to Hogwarts.”

“Due to your circumstances.” Madam Bones said. “Dumbledore has made it clear that sending you to Azkaban would not be prudent. You would not be safe there.”

“So after much discussion we resolved to transfigure a courtroom here at the Ministry to contain you.” Fudge inserted. “Do you have any questions?”

“What about the month of school I miss?” Harry asked. Actually he wasn’t really concerned about the missed schooling but Harry thought he should ask something.

“Dumbledore assured us your professors will tutor you sufficiently to catch up with your class by the end of the school year.” Fudge told him. “Anything else?” Harry shook his head. “I understand you have friends waiting outside the courtroom, if you wish to speak with them while we configure your cell, you may do so.”

Shaking slightly over the harsh cold word ‘cell’, Harry stood up. “I will be with you shortly Harry.” Dumbledore said as their eyes met briefly. The headmaster looked more solemn than Harry felt. Harry crossed the courtroom and pulled open the heavy door. Mrs. Weasley flung herself on him the second he stepped into the hall.

“Harry,” Mrs. Weasley held him to her. “What did they say?”

“Give him some air Molly.” Mr. Weasley pulled his wife off Harry.

"I've been sentence to ten years of solitary confinement." Harry said. Remus went white and seemed to be having trouble breathing. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley gasped.

And Mrs. Weasley grabbed Harry again and sobbed. "No, they can't do that. You're too young."

"Calm down. I wasn't finished." Harry pulled Ron's mother off him. "They suspended all but one month." The a little color came back to Lupin's face but he still looked upset.

"How could Dumbledore let them do that?" Remus stared at Harry then his eyes narrowed. "You pleaded guilty didn't you?" Harry nodded. Mrs. Weasley gasped again and Mr. Weasley closed his eyes and shook his head. Anger flashed into Lupin's normally mild face. "What were you thinking? Don't bother answering. You obviously weren't."

"Actually Remus, Harry's guilty plea turned out better than a plea of not guilty." Dumbledore came out of the courtroom followed by Fudge, Madam Bones and the square jawed wizard.

"We will come for you when we are finished." Fudge told Harry then left with the wizard down the corridor to the left of courtroom ten.

"What do you mean Albus?" Mr. Weasley had his hands on his wife to keep her from grabbing Harry again.

"Harry impressed the jury with his honesty and his willingness to take responsibility for his actions." Dumbledore gazed at Harry almost as if he was reevaluating him. "Many expected Harry to try to 'weasel' his way out of any punishment and were ready for that type of argument. Accepting some of the blame made those who were wavering on a harsher punishment feel less antagonistic toward Harry and even sorry for him."

"I didn't want anyone feeling sorry for me." Harry gritted his teeth.

"Of course you didn't." Dumbledore said. "But nevertheless that is how some of the panel felt. You were right in pleading guilty Harry."

"It wasn't a ploy." Harry frowned at Dumbledore. "I meant what I said."

"I know it wasn't and I know you did." Dumbledore blinked hard. "I must go down to put my protective spells on your...uh, accommodations."

"Albus! You can't let them lock him up!" Mrs. Weasley pleaded taking a hold of Dumbledore's arm. "He's only sixteen." She drew out the his age in a wail.

"Mrs. Weasley, please, don't." Harry put an arm around her shoulders. "I'll be okay. It's only a month."

"But you'll be all alone." Mrs. Weasley gave a little sob. Sighing Harry hugged her to him and she wrapped her arms around his waist. "You don't deserve this." She said in a muffled voice.

For a fleeting moment when he had heard the verdict, Harry had wished Ron, Hermione and Ginny were there to say good-bye for the next month. But now holding a very distraught Mrs. Weasley Harry was glad they weren't. It would just make it harder and Harry was determined to face his punishment without flinching.

Dumbledore patted her shoulder. "It seems you have things well in hand Harry. I'll be back shortly." The old wizard walked down the hall to the door the Minister of Magic had opened.

Mrs. Weasley didn't seem to be in any hurry to let Harry go so patted her back and gazed over to Lupin who was blinking hard. "Don't you fall apart on me." Harry said dryly. Remus tried to smile. "That's pathetic. Look I'll be okay. They will feed me right?"

"Of course they will." Mr. Weasley answered.

"Then it can't be any worse than with the Dursleys." Harry told them.

"That isn't any comfort." Mrs. Weasley pulled away from Harry, wiping her face with her purple handkerchief.

“Would you do me a favor Mrs. Weasley? Send an owl to Ginny Ron and Hermione and ask them to take care of Hedwig for me.” Harry hoped giving her something to do for him would make her feel better.

“Of course I will.” Mrs. Weasley nodded but to Harry’s dismay she looked as if she was about to cry again. Then he turned and saw Dumbledore, Fudge, Ogden, and Madam Bones walking back to him.

Harry took a deep breath, saying to himself, ‘I can do this I can do this.’ He stood up straight and squared his shoulders waiting.

“The cell is ready for you Harry.” Fudge sounded apologetic.

“I want to see it. Does he have enough blankets? It’s cold down here.” Mrs. Weasley started down the corridor but Harry stopped her.

“It will be fine Mrs. Weasley. Please?” Harry met her eyes. “It would be easier for me if we said good-bye here.” With those words Mrs. Weasley grabbed him again and clung tightly to his neck. “I’ll see you in a month okay?” He gently guided her arms down then stuck out his hand for Mr. Weasley to shake.

“Take care of yourself Harry.” Mr. Weasley gripped the hand firmly with both hands then took his wife’s arm. “Come on Molly. You need to write that letter and send it off.” He led her back down to the stairs and Harry waved when he saw Mrs. Weasley give a glance back at him. A lump threatened in Harry’s throat but he tightened his jaw and forced it down.

“I’ll walk with you to your room.” Remus said quietly but firmly so Harry wouldn’t argue with him.

“Okay Mummy.” Harry wanted to keep things light. It wasn’t going to be forever.

Fudge looked at Harry confused but took the lead and started down the hall. Harry followed with Remus walking on his left and Dumbledore on his right. Ogden and Madam Bones followed them.

The door they stopped at had a small opening at the top with bars and a wooden hinged door at the bottom for a food tray. This feature made Harry cringe a bit since it reminded him of his room at the Dursleys. Fudge opened the door inward and Harry saw to the left of the door stood a toilet and a small shower. On the other side of the room a narrow cot with one blanket. The only light was a single small torch and a small window high in the wall letting in a ray of sunshine.

When Dumbledore saw Harry gazing in puzzlement at the window he said. "I insisted on a window. It is unhealthy for a person not to know the passage of day and night."

"Thanks." Harry nodded then said. "Well, it's bigger than the cupboard under the stairs but smaller than my bedroom at the Dursleys." Fudge looked at him as if trying to understand Harry's seemingly lack of concern.

"Cornelius? May we have a word with Harry alone before we leave?" Dumbledore asked politely.

"Ah, well, yes." Fudge, Madam Bones and Ogden walked back down the hall as Dumbledore stepped inside the cell with Harry and Lupin.

The headmaster gave a quick glance around. "Listen closely to me Harry. This is a safer place for you than Azkaban but I could not convince them to use the dungeons at Hogwarts were you would be completely safe."

"I thought about that too." Harry glanced to the ceiling thinking of all the people in the ministry working above them. "There's a lot of people coming and going here."

"Exactly." Dumbledore nodded. "I offered to arrange you meals. Two people will bring it to you. If you do not know both of them don't eat the food." Dumbledore repeated emphatically. "You mustn't eat the food if you don't know who brings it." Harry nodded. "It's one way to insure the food is safe for you."

"I understand." Harry said then frowned. "How about also turning the tray a certain way. Like a hand of a clock? That way if someone did

manage to replace both people with phonies I'd still know something was up."

Dumbledore and Lupin stared at Harry for a moment then Remus gave a strained smile. "Mad-eye would be proud of you Harry. That's a good idea."

"Excellent idea." Dumbledore paused to think. "Starting on the quarter hour, how about a quarter turn each meal clockwise for three days then counter clockwise for four then back to three and so on?"

"Sounds like a plan." Harry agreed. "If the tray is round just have them put a mark on one side so I can tell it's turned right."

"I will do that." Dumbledore sighed. "You will be heavily guarded Harry but still be watchful."

"I will." Harry felt his throat tighten when Remus put a hand on his shoulder looking very miserable. "Get out of here before you start blubbing." Harry took the hand and shook it. Remus pulled Harry into a brief hug and patted his back.

"You are getting a bit of a smart mouth on you." Remus said reproachfully but his voice conveyed other emotions when he said hoarsely. "Take care, Harry." Remus and Dumbledore stepped out of the cell. Fudge and Ogden quickly came to the door.

"I almost forgot. Your wand please." Fudge held out his hand.

Having anticipated this request Harry said. "I left my wand at Hogwarts." He shot a quick glance at Dumbledore and Harry saw a slight nod of approval.

"Oh, very well. Step back." Fudge told Lupin who lingered at the door. Ogden grabbed the heavy brass ring on the door and it creaked as it swung shut with slight thud. Harry heard Dumbledore putting a charm on the door and for a brief moment Remus's worried face appeared behind the bars of the small window and then heavy footsteps echoed their departure.

Author's notes: Thanks for the reviews. pasting mental note back together

Malahide had to die. All DADA professors have to have something happen to them. The position is horrible jinxed.

The mistake isn't:

Neville's birthday. I found out after I had written that his was the 30th but being so close I didn't think it was so ill-conceived that their parents would celebrate together.

No godmother. Again I found this out after I had written one in but Alice Longbottom is hardly a 'real godmother' being how she's mentally gone, so that isn't it.

Harry's patronus is a stag not his animagus form.

If Hermione's parents take a magical port key into the castle I pretty sure they could see it.

Mark Evens being at Hogwarts, I guess I should have read more of JK's interviews. But that isn't the mistake I'm talking about.

It isn't that Dumbledore didn't go to Hogwarts the same time as McGonagall. The age thing was in an interview too.

The video they watched at Christmas, video cameras were around in 1981 and being wizards of course they could get it to play on today's VCRs even if it wasn't the same format.

Dumbledore is an old man, he just misspoke Ginny's age. LOL

Mistake clue for this chapter: The information can be found in one of the first three books, not in an interview.

Chapter 49

The footfalls faded away. Harry sighed gazing around at his cell. He sat down on the cot and found it a bit hard compared to his four poster bed at Hogwarts. But Harry stretched out his full length and yawned widely. Not having slept much last night and the stress of the trial was catching up to him. Even before last night he had been a month short of sleep so Harry closed his eyes and drifted off.

When he awoke a few hours later, Harry lay for a moment in confusion, wondering where he was. Then he remembered, solitary confinement. He stayed on his back looking at the dark ceiling. A patch of light blue could be seen through the small window and the same size square of light shone on the stone floor. Still must be day, Harry thought. He was glad Dumbledore had insisted on the window.

A small snort escaped Harry as he remembered how confused Fudge had looked. Even Dumbledore and Remus seemed puzzled by the ease Harry accepted his sentence. But this would be a breeze, Harry thought. They had no idea. Well, Dumbledore must have had a small idea of what head experienced at the Dursleys. Sure, he would miss his freedom but Harry was quite used to entertaining himself for long periods of time.

He sat up on the edge of his cot and glanced at the thick wooden door wondering when a meal would be served. Harry got up and got a drink from the sink next to the toilet. Actually this was much better than the Dursleys. There, Harry had to wait to use the bathroom. Only, Harry considered, he wished he had asked for something to read. Maybe he could ask when his meal arrived.

It wasn't very long when a familiar voice outside his cell door called. "Wotcher Harry."

"Tonks!" Harry jumped up and peered out of the barred window. Tonks normally cheery face looked concerned and had a smile forced on to it.

"Are you hunger?" Tonks asked. "I'll send for your meal if you are."

“Starving. Didn’t feel much like breakfast.” Harry said. “You’re guarding me?”

A different voice Harry didn’t recognize answered before Tonks could. “He’s in solitary. No chit chatting with the prisoner.”

“Leave off Williamson. I’ll talk to him if I want.” Tonks answered angrier than Harry had ever heard her. “Harry do you need anything?”

“Something to read would be nice.” Harry said briefly so not to irritate Williamson too much.

“There should be some reading material in there.” Tonks gazed in to the cell and pointed to the bed. “Check the other side of the cot, near the wall. I’m sure Dumbledore said he gave you something.”

Leaning across his bed Harry saw the small space between the cot and wall held three books, a roll of parchment, a bottle of ink and a quill. “Yes, I didn’t notice it before. Excellent.”

“Your meal is on its way.” Tonks said. Harry could tell her teeth were clenched. She must not like Williamson much, he thought.

Shortly a clunking noise could be heard coming down the hallway. Harry looked out the small window and saw Mad-Eye Moody stumping along after Kingsley Shacklebolt, who carried a tray of food. Shacklebolt’s deep voice echoed in the passage way. “There you go.” He pushed it through the wooden flap at the bottom of the door.

“Thanks.” Noting the position of the tray was correct Harry picked it up and carried it to his bed.

“Shove the tray out when you’re done lad.” Moody said through the door.

“I will.” Harry called back, a bit preoccupied with what was on the tray. The smell of fried chicken made Harry’s mouth water. He grabbed a drumstick and tore into it. Yes, this was much better than the Dursleys.

Over the past month Harry had become so worn down that it felt good to lie on his cot and do nothing. But Harry noticed, like most times he had been injured, the magic in him accelerated the healing of his body with the good food and rest.

Except for last summer Harry considered. He had been sick for three weeks. Scrofungulus. Harry said the word slowly in his mind. Where had Neville say it was from? Harry searched his mind for the name of the place and was pleasantly surprised when he managed to remember it, Burkina Faso. Wonder where that is? He didn't have a clue.

Life with the Dursleys passed through Harry's thoughts frequently because he remembered the many time he had been locked in the cupboard under the stairs, imprisoned as he was now. Except, that small boy had no friends to think about. No happy times to help keep his hope alive. Still, Harry remembered how his young self had spent the long hours alone. An active imagination had helped a lot. His mind had been able to take him anywhere he had read about or had seen on television. But most of the time Harry had fantasized about having a family, a mother and father who loved him. At the time he had no clue to what either had looked like. In his imagination his father always looked a lot like himself, similar to the way Uncle Vernon and Dudley looked like each other. But even though he knew they were sisters Harry never imagined his fantasy mother looking like Aunt Petunia in any way

Now that he knew what they looked like and had heard their voices, Harry occasionally allowed himself to think of what his life might have been like if his parents had not been killed. The image of a happy family came easy, easy to imagine but difficult to look at too closely. Unbidden an image of him and his father entered his mind and Harry was sickly remind of Lucius Malfoy and Draco, indulgent father and spoiled brat son. Would he have been an arrogant echo of his father? Harry wouldn't allow himself to believe it. Lots of kids grew up with nice parents without being obnoxious.

Many times Harry felt he was watching someone else's life when he thought of his childhood. But those times when found himself feeling sad for the little boy with no hope in the cupboard under the stairs and the old resentment toward Dumbledore rose, Harry got off his cot, dropped to the floor and did as many push up as he could. That argument was over and Harry didn't want to dwell on bad feelings of any sort.

Almost in deference to Malahide, Harry set up a routine of exercises and kept a log of how he progressed. At first he did push-ups, jumping jacks and ran in place then he looked around for something to use for pull-ups. His shower head proved solid enough, although Harry was sure it was because it was magical. By the third day Harry had a schedule down and only deviated from it when he started feeling sad or guilty. Then he would drop to the stone floor and again do push-ups until his arms gave out. The physical activity helped Harry in two ways. The exercise helped him sleep at night and it kept Harry from sinking into a pool of self-pity and guilt.

Besides keeping track of his exercises Harry made a mark for each passing day on the roll of parchment that had been in the cell. Which Harry had read in one of the books left 'A Prisoner's Rights by Claudine Bona' was standard issue to all prisoners of the Ministry of Magic. Although the parchment was normally used for a prisoner to write his or her will.

To keep his mind busy Harry tried to recall lessons from his early years at Hogwarts. He was amused by how hard those basic spells had seemed at the time. But it annoyed him greatly that he couldn't remember the twelve uses of dragon blood without using the snake speak potion. And Harry was sure that wasn't on the list when he had learned them.

Harry counted three sets of guards; Tonks and Williamson, Moody and Dawlish and Shacklebolt and Jones. There always seemed to be someone he knew with someone he didn't. Only Tonks, Moody and Shacklebolt every brought his meals to him. Tonks made sure Harry got the Daily Prophet at least once a week. Although to his

embarrassment he was just stepping out of the shower when her face appeared at the window in the door one time to hand it in to him before Williamson got there.

“Sorry Harry.” Tonks had quickly looked away but Harry heard her snort a bit.

“What do you want?” Harry had quickly wrapped his Hogwarts robes around his middle and peered out.

“I got this for you. Take it quick.” Tonks glanced down the hall and shoved the paper through the bars of the window. “Williamson is coming. Better hide it.”

“Hey great! Thanks.” Harry put it under his covers and came back to the window.

“You’re looking pretty good with all the exercising you’re doing.” Tonks gazed at his still wet shoulders and gave him a sly smile.

“Thanks. Not much else to do here.” Harry felt his face flush then he heard the disapproving mumble of Williamson.

It had been a long time since Harry had fantasized about his life or about anything. Now his mind drifted to the images of Ron and Hermione he had seen after Fudge had announced his sentence. For some strange reason Harry felt those images were, and he cringed at the thought, a real prediction. Maybe he did have seer blood in him. His mother had called it muggle intuition. But Lupin had said Lily knew things.

Often when he thought of his friends, memories he hadn’t visited in a long time came back to him and Harry once again enjoyed his first Christmas at Hogwarts with Ron, becoming friends with Hermione after the mountain troll incident and many other little things he had long put away from his conscious thoughts. But again the thought of who would be alive in ten years time came to his mind. Not wanting to

dwell on anything negative, Harry would rolled off his cot and began his regime of push-ups.

The prophecy found its way into Harry's reflections often with the accompanying unanswered questions of how and when he was going to accomplish his part. Harry felt sure time was on Voldemort's side. The longer the dark wizard was alive the more followers he could gather and the more protected he would be.

For the first time since hearing the prophecy, Harry realized he would not be fulfilling the prediction all alone. It wasn't just his fight. What had the sorting hat said? 'A force not alone in battle?' Knowing his friends would be at his side was both strengthening and distressing. Harry had ceased to worry about what would happen to him. Dying wasn't that hard. Surviving took more courage.

Courage to face the world without people he loved. Harry wondered if he had that much strength in him. Then Harry remembered the surge of power he had felt that had forced Voldemort from his mind. A fierce bright force he needed to tap in to some how, Harry was sure of that. And in one dark corner of his mind Harry also knew the dark arts would become essential too.

At night before he went to sleep, Harry reserved this time of day to think of Ginny. He would sigh often and remember her softness against him on the bed in the hospital wing. And being a male of sixteen with a healthy imagination, Harry often envisaged doing much more than the kissing Ginny would allow. Harry wasn't angry at Ginny for not going further but neither did he feel guilty for fantasizing future encounters. This line of thinking made Harry wonder how far Ron and Hermione had gone with their physical relationship. It wasn't something Harry could ask either of them, especially if Ron returned the question and asked him about Ginny. Like Harry could tell Ron how much kissing Ginny and he had done.

The one thing Harry noticed the absent of the most was the pain in his scar. It was gone. Well almost. A very slight prickling feeling would make it feel itchy but not anything near what he had

experienced the last couple months. Curious and a bit bored in the last week of his confinement, Harry went in search of the dark wizard's thoughts. With no strong emotions to follow Harry had a hard time finding a sensation that wasn't his. But eventually Harry followed a hint of a thought not his own.

The mind he entered was tired. Voldemort put up no resistance and if he knew someone was penetrating his mind he gave no indication as Harry cautiously probed the dark mind. An unsettled feeling crept to him but Harry felt hopeful as he pulled away from Voldemort. He knew Voldemort had been greatly disturbed by possessing Harry. And Harry also knew the contact had taken a lot out of the dark wizard. Before Harry drifted off to sleep he hoped Voldemort felt at least a little pain, similar to what his scar gave him.

For Harry the month of confinement went surprisingly fast but the last two days went dreadfully slow. He was tired of exercising in the confined space of the cell. Pacing back and forth, Harry couldn't imagine how Sirius managed in Azkaban. One month was long enough for Harry and there weren't any dementors here to drain all the happiness out of him.

His full strength and power had come back to him and Harry felt the need to use his magic both mentally and physically. It took all the self-control he had not to change into his phoenix form. That's all he would need, a charge of underage magic violation just when he would be getting out. Hopefully if he still felt good, Harry could be seeker for the last quidditch match of the year.

Finally as Harry was sitting on the edge of his cot staring at the door, he heard footsteps and familiar voices coming down the corridor. Resisting the urge to jump up and look through the bars, Harry waited. He heard a key being fitted into the lock and turned with a loud click.

"Harry?" Dumbledore's voice came through the door as it was pushed open.

"I'm still here." Harry said gripping the cot tightly to keep from running out and making a fool of himself.

"You may come out." Fudge's silhouette appeared at the doorway. Slowly Harry stood and walked to the door and the minister of magic stepped back to let him out. Blinking from the brighter light in the hall Harry felt Mrs. Weasley's arm around his neck and bent to hug her.

"Ohhh, Harry. Are you alright?" Mrs. Weasley gripped him so tightly Harry was glad he had practiced holding his breath.

"I'm fine Mrs. Weasley." Harry managed to squeak as she loosened her hold just bit to look at him.

"You look fitter now than when you went in." Mr. Weasley said patting Harry on the back then ran a hand across his shoulder to Harry's arm. "My word. Feel the muscle in you."

"Time well managed." Harry gave him a small smile. He had one eye on Fudge who looked a bit put out nobody was paying him any attention. Lupin hung back as if he knew there was more to be said by the minister.

"Minister." Harry nodded to him. This put the portly man in a better temper but Fudge still puffed up when he started speaking.

"Now then." Fudge cleared his throat. "Here are your release papers." Fudge handed Harry a large pale green envelope. Fudge rocked on his heels a bit. "And I must remind you Harry that you are on probation. Any hint of an incident like last month and you will serve out your ten year sentence." The man shifted a bit under the angry glare Mrs. Weasley gave him. "Do you understand?"

"Yes sir." Harry nodded, squaring his shoulders and standing up straight. To Harry's surprise he was as tall and perhaps a bit taller than the minister. Harry kept his thoughts on Voldemort's state of mind to himself. He would tell Dumbledore and the others later.

"Very well, you are released in the custody of Albus Dumbledore." Fudge said. "I hope this matter is settled. Good-day." He gave Dumbledore a slight nod and strode down the passage way to the stairs. The whole group standing outside the cell door sighed as one, including Harry.

"My turn." Remus grabbed Harry and hugged him before Mrs. Weasley could reclaim her hold on him. "It was a long month Harry."

"It wasn't so bad." Harry said and he almost added that he had done worse but out of the corner of his eye he saw Dumbledore with a very guilty look on his face. "Can we get out of here?"

"Of course." Dumbledore patted Harry's back. "I thought you could have dinner at headquarters and then we will return to Hogwarts in the quiet of the evening." Mr. and Mrs. Weasley started walking down the corridor with Lupin and Dumbledore followed alongside of Harry.

"Sounds good." Harry said then stopped when the Weasleys did, right before the stairs to the ninth floor of the ministry. He glanced at the adults curiously then saw Dumbledore pull out a small empty flower pot and hold it out to everyone.

The port key took them to the huge stone kitchen of number twelve Grimmauld Place. Fred and George greeted him so enthusiastically Harry was immediately suspicious. Mr. Granger shook his hand as Mrs. Granger gave him a hug.

"I can't believe they put you in jail." Mrs. Granger wiped her eyes. "After all the good you've done."

Mrs. Weasley immediately started on dinner and Mrs. Granger hurried to help. Harry sank down on a chair at the kitchen table glad to be out of the musty cell, despite his insistence that the time spent there wasn't so bad. Lupin put a butterbeer in his hand and Harry took a long drink. "Ahhh, that tastes good." Harry sighed.

"Thought you said it wasn't bad in that cell." Remus prodded giving Harry a smirk.

"Not bad but this is definitely better." Harry grinned and glanced at Dumbledore who sat with a pensive look on his face. "What?"

"I think the 'what' on everyone's mind is; did you have any contact with Voldemort?" The headmaster asked.

“Not on his part.” Harry took another draw on the bottle of butterbeer relishing the taste. Not that the food in solitary had been bad. In fact he had recognized the flavor of Mrs. Weasley’s cooking quite often. “I was bored so I went in search of him.” A dead silence filled the kitchen.

“Another foolish attempt to take matters into your own hands, Potter.” Snape’s voice drawled from the doorway. “When will you ever learn?”

Harry gazed insolently at the sallow faced man leaning against the door frame. “Seems taking matters into my own hands has saved a few people, deserving and otherwise.”

There was a snort from Fred and George. Snape returned Harry’s stare with a sneer of his own. “I have no doubt most would agree with you Potter but the fact remains, you have an atrocious habit of acting before thinking.”

“I suppose there are some that would agree with you Professor.” Harry didn’t break his eye contact with Snape. “Why are you here?”

Glaring contemptuously at Harry, Snape sighed as if imposed upon. “I was cleaning up the lab I use to brew the wolfsbane potion for Lupin and restocking the ingredients for next month.”

“Harry, you were saying” Dumbledore interrupted to draw the conversation back to his topic. “About Voldemort?”

“Oh, right.” Harry shifted in his seat and turned to look at the headmaster. “He’s tired. Possessing me took a lot out of him. I really don’t think he’ll try something like that again unless all odds are in his favor.”

“A situation we will work hard to avoid.” Dumbledore said relieved. “Severus, please join us for dinner.” The silence in the room was amplified by Mrs. Weasley clanking a pan.

“Thank you headmaster.” Snape gave a slight bow to Dumbledore. “I do not think my company is what Potter would like for a homecoming.”

“If you want to stay.” Harry couldn’t believe this was coming out of his mouth. “It won’t bother me.” When Snape’s eyes widen in surprise Harry added rolling his eyes. “I’ve had dinner with you in your quarters, I can keep things down.”

Another snort came from the twins. Snape’s dark eyes darted to them then back to Harry. “The question is; if I can Potter?” He smirked.

“Sit down Severus.” Lupin pulled out a chair beside him. “I doubt if you’ll get a better invitation.” Snape eyed Lupin then slowly moved to the seat offered. His gaze went to the twins.

“I warn you now.” Was all Snape had to say to them as he sat down.

Before Harry could jump and help set the table Remus put a hand on his shoulder. “You sit and rest.”

“I’ve been resting for a month.” Harry snorted and got up to help anyway.

Soon the table was full all of Harry’s favorite foods and the twins probing questions of what Harry did for a month all by himself. As best he could Harry answered in general terms and avoided anything embarrassing or awkward for either himself or Dumbledore.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry watched Snape eat, saying very little to anyone. Lupin and Dumbledore were the only ones who tried to include him in any conversation. After a large piece of Mrs. Weasley’s rhubarb crumble, Harry felt a bit more disposed in having Snape at the table, especially when he remembered the runespoor.

“Professor Snape,” Harry shifted in his chair. “The headmaster said you were there when the runespoor disappeared?”

“Yes, Potter.” Snape gave a nod and a scathing glare. “And I understood that was not to be general knowledge.” He glanced at the rest of the room.

Harry flushed. He had forgotten in his haste to find out about the runespoor. “I forgot.” He glanced at Dumbledore to see if he was angry but the old wizard gave him patient gaze.

“It was bound to get out sooner or later.” Dumbledore said.

“Later would have been preferable.” Snape quipped.

“We’re not going to tell anyone.” Fred glared at Snape.

“Perhaps not, but there is still the matter of a spy being present in this house waiting for information such as this.” Snape said condescendingly.

“Could Wormtail get information to Voldemort?” Harry started mentally berating himself for his blunder.

“It is possible.” Dumbledore said soberly. “We have reason to believe he was the one who informed the Daily Prophet of Ginny being an empath.”

“Me and my big mouth.” Harry muttered.

“Yes, Potter, now what was so important as to risk the spreading of significant information?” Snape sneered. Harry took a couple of deep breaths, reminding himself he needed Snape’s cooperation for the next question.

“Did she say anything? Before she disappeared?” Harry asked Snape quickly.

“Since I do not have the ability to speak with snakes I wouldn’t know.” Snape sneered.

“Yes, you would.” Harry insisted. “Did she hiss or make any noise before she vanished?”

For a moment Snape sat thinking then slowly nodded. "Yes, she was very agitated and the two heads were hissing quite a bit." Then he drawled. "But I can not repeat it so you would understand, I'm sure."

"But your memory would recall exactly what she said." Harry leaned toward Snape. "Maybe she said what was happening. If I heard those hissings I could understand what she was saying and maybe find out where she went." Harry finished excited by the prospect of finding the runespoor.

Snape nodded thoughtfully for a half a minute before the hint of what Harry was suggesting came to him. His eyes narrowed and Snape seethed. "Solitary must have addled your brain Potter to even think of such an idea."

"We have to find her." Harry said almost desperately and he actually felt a fear mounting that Snape wouldn't help.

"It is important Severus." Dumbledore said quietly. "We can not afford to let Voldemort acquire the shield." Snape looked at Dumbledore as if the headmaster had totally lost his mind. But the old wizard held the potion master's gaze for a long moment then Snape cast his eyes to the table, his teeth clenched. "We can do it in my office Severus. I will be there too." Harry was sure this offer was for his protection as well as insuring Harry only saw what Snape wanted him to see.

"Very well." Snape snapped and stood up. "I will be at Hogwarts." Without giving Dumbledore or anyone a chance to say another word Snape strode to the kitchen fireplace and from a small pot on the mantle took a bit of powder and threw it into the small fire. The flames turned emerald green and Snape crouched as he stepped into them and said quickly. Hogwarts, potion master's quarters."

"Interesting." Dumbledore commented at Snape's hasty departure.

"What is?" Lupin asked curiously.

A smile flickered on the headmaster's lips and his blue eyes twinkled brightly. "Severus must be extremely fond of the runespoor for him to have given in so quickly." The old wizard explained.

"She liked him too." Harry said still worried of what might happen with his slip of the tongue.

"Well being a Slytherin, it is understandable." Fred said.

"Yeah, snakes of a scale slither together as they say." George smirked in a way that made Harry think Snape would find a surprise, sometime, somewhere, before the night was out.

Dumbledore and Harry went back to the headmaster's quarters by floo powder. Being after curfew, the halls were empty and dark as Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower. Only a month had past but things seem strange to Harry. Perhaps it was merely the absence of people that gave him an odd feeling, Harry thought.

When Harry arrived at the Fat Lady's portrait before he could say the password Dumbledore had told him, the painting swung open and hands dragged him through the portrait hole. If Harry thought Mrs. Weasley's grip strangled it was nothing compared to Ginny's and Hermione's, although Mrs. Weasley had not kissed his face rapidly as Ginny was doing.

"You're back! You're back!" Ginny said between kisses. "I missed you so much."

Hermione just buried her head on his shoulder and Harry could hear her crying as she seemed determined to squeeze all the air out of him. "I can't believe they put you in jail." Her muffled voice sobbed. Harry patted Hermione and Ginny then looked up to find Ron staring at him with an odd expression. Their eyes met and Harry understood. He grinned at Ron rolling his eyes at the girls then up at the ceiling. A slight smile replaced the seriousness on the redhead's face then widen as Ron gave a nod.

There was no need for words between Ron and him. They understood one another and as the girls fussed over him, Harry and

Ron communicated what they needed from each other just by meeting each other's eyes.

Author's notes: Reviews!!! I love them!! Thanks bunches!!!

Someone who reviewed last chapter wanted to translate this story into French. I'm not sure what this involves if you want to email me feel free to do so.

I do not mind any links to my story. I think you'll really like the chapter after this one and I like chocolate frogs...yummm.

The mistake isn't:

Neville's birthday. I found out after I had written that his was the 30th but being so close I didn't think it was so ill-conceived that their parents would celebrate together.

No godmother. Again I found this out after I had written one in but Alice Longbottom is hardly a 'real godmother' being how she's mentally gone, so that isn't it.

Harry's patronus is a stag not his animagus form.

If Hermione's parents take a magical port key into the castle I pretty sure they could see it.

Mark Evens being at Hogwarts, I guess I should have read more of JK's interviews. But that isn't the mistake I'm talking about.

It isn't that Dumbledore didn't go to Hogwarts the same time as McGonagall. The age thing was in an interview too.

The video they watched at Christmas, video cameras were around in 1981 and being wizards of course they could get it to play on today's VCRs even if it wasn't the same format.

Neville's Gran did send him a howler in fact we know of at least two. Before Ron opened his Neville said he had gotten one once and waited and it was horrible. And in PoA when Neville left the list of passwords lying around his gran sent another howler.

Did I write that Fudge sent Sirius to Azkaban? I re-read things (scanned it) and couldn't find where I had written this. If I did that is a mistake but not the one I found. LOL But I'll say you are warm to feeling a bit sweaty about the information coming from the third book.

Mistake clue for this chapter: Let's narrow it down a bit. It involves someone who has been to number twelve Grimmauld Place

Chapter 50

The dorm was dark and silent when Harry entered with Ron. Even though McGonagall had sent everyone up to their beds before Harry came back, he was a little disappointed that Neville, Dean and Seamus had not waited up to greet him. Harry went to his wardrobe and took off his robes then put on his pajamas. With a sigh Harry climbed into his four poster bed, settled down into the softness and closed his eyes. Out of the darkness Harry heard.

“Good-night Harry.” Neville said softly.

“Night Harry.” Dean called.

“See you in the morning Harry.” Seamus said with a yawn.

For a long moment Harry couldn't answer but he finally managed. “Good-night and thanks guys.”

The whispers at breakfast didn't bother Harry. He was so used to that now he paid no attention to them. But Harry had a hard time ignoring Malfoy as he across the green lawn to for Care of Magical Creatures after Herbology. Hermione's insistent, “Ignore him.” Wasn't any help.

“I can't believe they let you come back Potter.” Malfoy sneered as the class waited for Hagrid. “A criminal at Hogwarts. This place has never sunk so low.”

Ron's hands grabbed onto his arm as Harry spun around to look at the blonde. Strangely Harry felt in complete control of his anger and stared unblinkingly at Malfoy.

“What Potter?” Malfoy squirmed under the intent gaze. “Don't you like the truth?”

“I know the truth, Malfoy.” Harry said quietly, carefully considering what he should and shouldn't say. “Hogwarts sunk lower to let you

back in. And I know what you are Malfoy.” Harry’s stare intensified. “I was there. I saw the fear in your face.”

Malfoy paled visibly but couldn’t break his eyes from Harry’s. “I don’t know what you’re talking about Potter. You’re crazy. You should be locked up.”

“The thing is Malfoy, I always knew you were a git but I always thought you were smarter than that, more self preserving.” Harry kept going like Malfoy hadn’t said a word. “Do you think your master will protect you? Dumbledore was willing to die rather than to kill me. Would Voldemort do that for you?” Harry snorted. “Will you protect him? Like Malahide did for Dumbledore, with his life?” Harry stepped closer to Malfoy but with no threat in his movements

Everyone was watching them now and everyone seemed to be frozen in place around them as Harry focused on Malfoy. “He was a fool.” Draco said haltingly trying hard not to take a step back but failing and stepping on Crabbe’s foot.

“I am very glad I have lots of fools like that around me, Malfoy.” Harry still held the blonde’s eyes. “Because I have no doubt what they will do for me. And I hope they know I would do the same for them. You are just one little pawn on his chessboard. If he has to sacrifice you he will. No better than all the muggle-born he’s killed. No better than a squib to him.”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Malfoy flared. “You don’t know anything. You don’t understand.” Harry saw a flash of anger in the pale grey eyes replaced by a growing fear. Crabbe and Goyle stared at Malfoy, looking for him to tell them what to do as always.

“I understand more about him than I really care to.” Harry kept his voice calm. “And I understand you have very hard choices to make. Be sure you make the right ones Malfoy, while you still have the opportunity to choose.” Harry turned away from Malfoy without saying another word. Ron let go of Harry’s arm staring at him in shock.

All during Hagrid’s lesson on the augurey, a thin mournful-looking bird resembling a vulture whose cries foretell rain, Malfoy remained quiet

and subdued. As Harry, Ron and Hermione were walking back to the castle later Ron prodded Harry in the arm.

“Where did all that come from?” Ron asked still a bit in wonder.

“I must admit Harry I’m a bit impressed myself.” Hermione said.

“I’ve had a few days to think about things. Gives a guy a whole new perspective on things.” Harry gave Ron a sideways grin. “You should try it.”

“No thanks.” Ron snorted. “I’ll let you do the talking from now on.”

“Thanks a lot.” Harry laughed then turned when he felt another tap on his shoulder. “What’s up Seamus?”

“What did you mean, about Malfoy? You know what he is?” Seamus’s eyes smoldered. “He’s a death eater isn’t he?”

“I can’t tell you one way or the other Seamus.” Harry sighed. He had evidently said too much. “Just leave it okay?”

“How can you protect that?” Seamus shouted pointing at Malfoy as he walked past them. “After what they did to my parents?”

“I’m not protecting him.” Harry gave a jerk of his head toward the Slytherin now running up the stone steps to the castle. “I’m protecting you from getting into trouble you don’t need.”

“Who protected my parents?” Seamus yelled at Harry, tears starting down his contorted face. “I’ll kill him I swear.” He started to go after Malfoy.

“You would murder Malfoy for something his father did?” Harry said quietly blocking Seamus’s flight back to the castle by standing in front of him. Ron stepped over to stand beside Harry and Hermione gently took Seamus’s arm. “Sins of the father, Seamus? I think our side is better than that.” The Irish teen was shaking with anger but grief quickly took over as Hermione put her arm around him.

“Come on Seamus. He’s not worth it.” Dean Thomas took a firm hold on Seamus’s arm when he pulled away from Hermione. “I’ll look after him.” Dean told Hermione.

“Let us know if you need any help.” Harry called after them as Dean led Seamus up the steps to the castle.

“He hasn’t broken down like that in a month.” Hermione said as they entered the great hall for lunch.

“Remus said sometimes things just hit you out of the blue.” Harry said quietly, sitting across from Ron and Hermione. He looked around for Ginny but couldn’t see her or many of the other fifth years.

“I guess Ginny went to the library.” Harry said still gazing at the doors to the great hall. Then he realized the doors were new. A flash of guilt washed over him but didn’t linger as he took the bowl of stew Hermione had dished out for him. “What?” Hermione had been staring at him with a peculiar look on her face.

“I was just thinking.” Hermione glanced down at her bowl.

“I hate it when you do that.” Harry said between his clenched teeth. “Do I always have to drag it out of you? Just tell me.”

“Well,” Hermione took a breath then let it out. “How do you feel Harry? About what happened a month ago?”

“Uh? What has that got to do with anything?” Harry glanced at Ron to see if he knew what Hermione was on about but Ron looked as confused as he felt.

“Humor me and answer.” Hermione smiled.

“I’m fine. I did my time.” Harry shrugged.

“He was right.” Hermione said in amazement giving a quick glance to the staff table then back at Harry.

“Who was right about what?” Ron was getting as impatient as Harry.

"Ron, I told you what Dumbledore said when I went to see him." Hermione said.

"Yes, but it didn't make any sense then so why does it now?" Ron shrugged and went back to his stew.

Before Harry could say anything Hermione leaned toward him and said. "After Dumbledore told us you had to do a month in solitary, I went ballistic." Ron snorted but didn't interrupt. "I went to the library and looked up all I could about the charges and you pleading guilty." Harry nodded. Of course Hermione would go to the library. "They had to sentence you to something but they could have suspended the entire sentence. You didn't have to serve any time."

"Surely Dumbledore knew that." Harry said. "The others must have...."

"Let me finish then you'll understand." Hermione said. "Be quiet Ron. So anyway I went to Dumbledore and threw the biggest argument at him I could." She frowned. "By the way, you were right about that calm demeanor being irritating when you're angry."

"Glad you noticed." Harry snorted.

"He told me to sit down and he'd try to explain. I never saw Dumbledore look so sad." Hermione leaned back a bit. "He told me the Wizengamot wanted to suspend the entire sentence but he felt the month was necessary for you?"

"What?" Harry gave a quick glance at the headmaster sitting at the staff table.

"That's what I said." Hermione nodded. "I asked, you think a month in solitary is necessary for Harry? Then Dumbledore said. 'No, Harry thinks a month in solitary is necessary'."

"See I told you it didn't make any sense." Ron mumbled.

Hermione continued as if Ron hadn't said anything. "Of course I asked Dumbledore to explain and he said, 'It is because of me, Harry sees this as a necessary punishment. Because he spent so much time in a cupboard under a stairs, Harry feels he deserves this.'" Hermione swallowed and blinked hard. "I almost burst out crying right in front of him."

"Total rubbish." Ron said shaking his head.

"You feel better don't you, Harry? About yourself? That you did your time?" Hermione asked still ignoring Ron. "Dumbledore was right. I didn't want to believe him. I thought his explanation was ludicrous. That you needed absolution, a way to forgive yourself for what happened."

Harry sat stunned and silent for a long time staring at Hermione. "I did think a lot about my time in the cupboard under the stairs at the Dursleys'." Harry said slowly. "About how much better the cell was and at least this time I deserved it." He stopped and gazed to the staff table again. Dumbledore was talking with McGonagall.

"Dumbledore said if you hadn't been punished by the Wizengamot you would have come back to Hogwarts with a load of guilt." Hermione said then added. "He also mentioned now and then, time alone gives a person a chance to heal physically and grow emotionally."

"So Harry, do you forgive yourself?" Ron questioned as if asking him to pass the salt. Hermione slapped Ron's arm but Harry laughed.

"I think I do." Harry blinked a few times. "Dumbledore might have done something right this time."

"I'm glad Harry." Hermione sighed. "It really wasn't your fault." Immediately Hermione knew she shouldn't have said that but Harry wasn't the one to disagree with her.

"No, it was my fault." Ginny sat down beside Harry. Her words caused the smile on his face to vanish. "If I hadn't broke up with you..." She

closed her eyes and her jaw was clenched. "I should have been in that cell with you."

"Believe me Ginny, you were, every night." Harry put an arm around Ginny's shoulders and gave her a sly grin. Ginny's face went bright red.

"All right Potter. I allowed you to snog my sister senseless last night but I don't want to hear about any dreams you had about her." Ron growled.

"Oh, I wasn't asleep." Harry grinned as Ron's mouth fell open and Hermione dissolved against Ron in a fit of giggles.

"Stop! Stop right there!" Ron put up his hands to block Harry and Ginny from his view, his face almost purple. "Please tell me you're joking. Because if I even think of...I can't say it."

"I'm joking." Harry said without hesitation. Ron lowered his hands and eyed him.

"You're lying." Ron slumped then said quickly. "But you're a good friend to lie to me about it. I appreciate that."

"Anytime." Harry chuckled. He turned his attention to Ginny. "I thought you were going to the library."

"I wanted to have lunch with you." Ginny admitted. "It is your first day back. I can do a little studying here."

"Good I like watching you." Harry smiled then nudged her and darted his eyes to Ron. "Gives me material for later." Hermione choked on her pumpkin juice and Ron sprayed stew across the table.

After lunch Harry walked Ginny to her next class. Sometimes she seemed almost shy around him, like when she was in her first year at Hogwarts. When Harry saw an awed expression on her face as Ginny gazed at their clasped hands he asked. "What's up?"

The expected flush rose on her cheeks and Ginny shrugged as they stopped just out of ear shot of the other students in her year. "I'm just happy you're back." Ginny said lamely. When Harry gave her a look of disbelief she relented. "I know it's only been a month but..." The blush on her face darkened. "You seem so much older. I know it's silly." She stared at the floor after glancing up at him a couple of times.

Harry tipped her chin up to make her look at him. "Even if I am, I still love you." He whispered. He felt her swallow and Harry knew the only thing that kept Ginny from flinging herself into his arms were the other students waiting nearby.

"I love you too." Ginny put her hand on his still cupping her chin. Her eyes grew bright. "Did you really think of me every night?"

"Yes." Harry smiled.

"What about?" Ginny dared.

Harry bent and whispered in her ear. "I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

Ginny gave a squeal which she stifled quickly. "You are so bad." She grinned. "What makes you think I thought of you, like that?"

Harry laughed and looked up as if thinking. "Let me see, could it have been the way you, as Ron so delicately put it, snogged me senseless when I got back?"

"Well, maybe we can discuss them later." Ginny grinned but Harry noticed a slightly worried look cross her face. "I have to go. See you at dinner?"

"See you at dinner." Harry gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and watched her go. Then he turned and made his way to the transfiguration classroom for animagus training. Just outside the door he met a tabby cat with bespectacled markings around its eyes. Then Professor McGonagall appeared.

"I thought you might have forgotten Potter." She eyed him over her glasses.

"No, I walked Ginny to class. Sorry, Professor, I didn't mean to keep you waiting." Harry said.

"I see. Come along then." She opened the door and entered with Harry following her into the classroom. Professor McGonagall gazed at him for a few moments.

"What?" Harry set down his schoolbag. Was he going to get eyed by everyone?

"I have never known anyone to come out of jail looking better than when they went in Potter." She smirked then asked. "Have you changed into your animagus form since you have returned?"

"No." Harry answered. "But I know I won't have any problems."

"I doubt that you will too." McGonagall walked to a window and opened it wide. "Fly away little bird." She grinned at his confusion. "You've been cooped up for a month Potter, take a little time and go fly."

"Really!" Harry broke into a wide smile. "You mean it?"

"I certainly do." McGonagall eyed him reproachfully. "But you are not to leave the Hogwarts grounds and do not fly over the Forbidden Forest. If you get tired, land immediately. Understood?"

"I sure do." Harry laughed and his next breath he soared out of the open window.

"Remember what I said Potter. Keep your head about you." McGonagall's call came after him.

Harry laughed again and the pure tones of a phoenix drifted back to her. Before Harry knew it he had climbed high above the Hogwarts castle, the many towers and turrets clearly visible at this height. Tucking his wings Harry went into a dive then pulled out turning and

twisting in sheer delight. Now Harry was doubly glad of his exercises during his month confinement. His wings felt stronger than before and he eagerly tested their limits.

Staying high Harry flew with all the speed he could muster from one end of the quidditch pitch to the other. It was a way for Harry to gage his speed, comparing in his mind, to how fast his firebolt could make the same trip. Although the test was not very scientific Harry thought he might be a little faster on his firebolt but his phoenix form was definitely more maneuverable.

A little out of breath after racing around, Harry dove toward the lake and skimmed its glass like surface dipping his bill in the water as he flew the length of it. Then he climbed above the whomping willow and found a thermal to take him higher. He had seen birds ride hot air currents and it didn't look hard but Harry found it did require him to pay attention even though he didn't have to flap his wings to stay airborne.

One feather out of place sent him plummeting like a stone several meters before Harry managed to pull up. It took some practice but Harry soon had the hang of it. He discovered if he let his body feel the air and not think too much, his phoenix self would automatically adjust his wings correctly. But if he thought about flapping and flying and the mechanics of the whole business, he became extremely clumsy and everything was ten times harder.

Hanging lazily on a thermal, Harry gazed down toward Hagrid's hut where he saw movement. Students were standing around. Harry focused his eyes and spotted bright red hair. A feather shifted slightly and he glided silently high over the class. He had too much respect for Hagrid to swoop in and disrupt the class, though he wished he could. He focused his sight even tighter on Ginny. His phoenix vision zoomed in on the parchment she was taking notes on. O.W.L. Review was the subject heading and underneath were the names of the many creatures studied over the past five years. Then Harry saw some writing on the edge of the parchment. He focused harder and in very small handwriting was; Mrs. Harry Potter, Ginny Potter, Mrs. Harry J. Potter, and Mrs. Harry James Potter. Harry laughed sending

phoenix song echoing over the grounds. He saw Hagrid looking around for the source of the cry.

His wings shifted and the thermal took him higher and closer to the castle. Lost in thought Harry wondered how he could use this information to tease Ginny. She was so hard to tease having so many brothers Ginny was invulnerable to Harry's meek attempts.

A shadow from above passed across him, bringing Harry out of his musings. He looked up concerned but gliding above him was, another phoenix. For a moment Harry stared then laughed. "Fawkes?" His phoenix form must have translated his mental question correctly and Fawkes's response, because Harry understood when the scarlet bird beckoned him to follow.

To Harry's surprise Fawkes headed towards the mountains near Hogsmeade. At the edge of Hogwarts's boundaries Harry stopped and told him he wasn't allowed to go further. Fawkes sang an understanding tone and flew in a wide arc toward the castle, in the direction of one of the largest towers. Focusing on a window, Harry realized it was Dumbledore's office. Beating his wings hard to come along side Fawkes, Harry hoped the phoenix would understand what he wanted to do.

Harry erupted into Dumbledore's office and soared to the golden perch by the door like he owned it. As he ruffled his feathers and started preening, Harry saw Dumbledore give him a glance then a slow smile spread across the headmaster's face.

"Good afternoon Harry." Dumbledore nodded to him.

"How did you know it was me, Professor?" Harry laughed after he had changed back.

"Fawkes and I have been together much too long for me to mistake another phoenix for him." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Besides your head feathers are a much darker scarlet and they stick up a bit in the back."

"I should have known better than to try to trick you." Harry chuckled.

"I would think." Dumbledore smiled. "I'm glad you stopped by though. Professor Snape will be here promptly at seven so to keep him as calm as possible, please be on time."

"I'll be here even if I have to fire travel." Harry assured him. A flash of flame announced the real Fawkes' returned and the beautiful scarlet bird took his place on the golden perch with a twitter to Dumbledore.

"He wanted me to follow him to the mountains." Harry said.

"Really?" Dumbledore stared at his phoenix. "I wonder why?"

"Maybe I could find out." Harry said then there were two phoenixes in the headmaster's office. Now Harry could fully comprehend what Professor McGonagall meant by not really talking to other cats but understanding their intent. It was much different communicating with Fawkes than the runespoor. Harry changed back into his human form after a couple minutes and turned to Dumbledore. "He just wanted to show me around. So I wouldn't get into trouble." Harry looked back at Fawkes.

"Thank you Fawkes." Dumbledore nodded at the scarlet bird. "For thinking to look after Harry."

"I better go back to the transfiguration classroom." Harry said. "Professor McGonagall will be getting worried I slammed into a tree or something."

"Good day Harry." Dumbledore said as Harry changed to a phoenix then burst into flames.

Harry appeared outside the window to the transfiguration classroom so he wouldn't startle his teacher. He glided through the window and changed back.

"I was beginning to wonder Potter." Professor McGonagall said obviously relieved.

"Sorry Professor. I met Fawkes and he wanted to show me the mountains." Harry hastily added. "I told him I wasn't allowed so I tried to fool Professor Dumbledore by trading places with Fawkes."

"A foolish attempt no doubt." McGonagall said. "Are you tired?"

"No." Harry grinned. "It was great!"

"Good." McGonagall gazed in disbelief at Harry.

"What?" Not again. Harry frowned.

"The headmaster was right about..." McGonagall let out a breath. "About your confinement." She seemed very irritated.

"Oh, that, Hermione explained it to me." Harry gave her a wry smile.

"She did, did she? Perhaps I should get her to explain it to me." McGonagall snorted. "Oh, by the way." She searched on her desk and pulled out a scroll. "These are the assignments you must make up for each of your subjects." She held it out to him. "A paper is due on reversing the affects of transfigured people next Monday. I expect you to have it finished." She eyed him.

"Okay." Harry nodded as he unrolled the scroll and read down the list. He sighed. "I better start some of this now. I have to meet with the headmaster later. Thanks for your time Professor." Harry picked up his book bag and swung it onto his shoulder.

"You're welcome Potter. Good day." McGonagall called after him.

Working steadily on his homework until dinner, Harry went down to the great hall with Ron, Hermione and Ginny. To his hidden disappointment Ginny ate quickly and left for the library, Harry tried to keep an encouraging understanding look on his face when she told him she had to go.

"I'm really sorry. I've just got so much homework." Ginny said as she ate hurriedly.

"I know. Actually, so do I." Harry sighed. "And I have to meet with Dumbledore at seven."

"I'll see you later in the common room?" Ginny asked as got up from the bench.

"I'll be there." Harry grinned when Ginny gave him a quick absentminded kiss. He sighed as she left the hall.

"She really does have a lot of homework Harry. O.W.L. year you know." Hermione said anxiously.

"I remember Hermione." Harry gazed at her. "I'm not going to put any pressure on her."

"Good." Hermione said softening her tone with a smile. "I expect you and Dumbledore will have a lot to talk about."

"Ah, yeah." Harry glanced around and whispered. "I'll tell you later about that. Not here." Both Ron and Hermione's eyes widened.

"You aren't mad at him again are you?" Ron asked.

"No. Nothing like that." Harry said then said firmly. "I'll tell you later."

"Alright. It better be good with that kind of build up." Ron warned.

"I don't think you will have any complaints." Harry snorted.

At twenty till seven Harry arrived at the stone gargoyle which guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office. "Chocolate covered almonds." The stone statue sprang to life and jumped aside. Harry took the spiraling stairs up the headmaster's door. He knocked.

"Come in." The door swung open on its own and Harry went inside. Snape stood at one end of the desk with his wand tip in the roots of his lank hair. A silvery strand followed the wand as he moved it to the stone basin before him. The cloudy substance swirled as Snape added his thoughts to the pensive.

"Excellent Severus." Dumbledore said. "I'll let you go first, Harry will follow then I will." He spoke quickly as if not to give Snape a chance to back out.

"Fine." Snape snapped then leaned over the basin and touched his large nose to the surface. Harry was startled to see Snape disappear into the pensive. He knew something like that would happen but he had never seen it from this point of view.

"After you Harry. And please do not go nosing around Snape's quarters." Dumbledore cautioned.

"I've been there often enough. I don't know what I could do with you and him standing there." Harry said as he moved to the pensive. He took a deep breath and leaned over the gray surface. But instead of peering down into Snape's quarters he saw the face of a clock. Harry moved closer to see if he could see anything around it. Just as he touched the surface and felt himself being tumbled into the pensive, Harry saw a name in very tiny loopy writing in the clock face near a key hole. It read F. Potter.

The second Harry landed he looked around for the clock. Snape was bent over the corner of his desk and Harry hurried over to see. 'Professor why?' Harry broke off. This was the pensive Snape. He was adjusting dials on the elaborate potion timer.

Before Harry could confirm what he had read and hard grip clutched at his arm. "That is not why you are here Potter." Snape growled angrily pulling Harry around.

"Sorry but I saw." Harry turned his head to look at the clock.

"Harry, attend to what the runespoor is saying." Dumbledore said as he appeared next to him. Quickly Harry turned to see the great

serpent almost pacing back and forth in front of the fire. As the heads spoke Harry translated the hisses.

"Fool." Giza hissed.

"We must stay. Our young master is getting better." Hapa insisted. "The dark one says so."

"How many men in countless millennium have said the same thing?" Giza raged. "And how many have spoken the truth."

"He needs us." Hapa said softly. "If he awakes and we are not here, what will he do?"

"And if he does not awake and we are here I know what I have to do?" Giza returned. "I do not want to live through another Vaynor Motte."

"Nor do I." Hapa agreed. "But the dark one knows not to touch the shield."

"There are too many here." Giza spat. "The first master was wise. Think of him."

"Kesho, speak your thoughts." Hapa turned to the third head.

"It is cold here. I would like to feel the heat of our hatching ground." Kesho hissed softly. "The years in the egg were long and cold. We need to leave."

"Faithless worm." Hapa sputtered. "You would abandon our master?"

"He loves us. He will find us." Kesho turned her great orange head to Hapa. "It is time to go home."

"Home." Giza echoed her head also turned towards Hapa.

Hapa gave a resigned nod and said. "Home." The runespoor and the shield next to the couch dissolved silently away.

Dumbledore, Snape and Harry stood in quietly for a moment. "Where is home for a runespoor?" Harry finally asked. Snape snorted in contempt.

"The trouble is Harry what is home in our time might not have been at the time your runespoor broke shell." Dumbledore took Harry's arm and a moment later the three of them were back by the desk in the headmaster's office.

"So where is home today?" Harry asked again ignoring Snape's smirk. He had read about the runespoor's origins but couldn't remember at the moment.

"Burkina Faso, a small poor country in western Africa is where there are several forest set aside for its use." Dumbledore said then in concern. "Harry?"

With his heart beating rapidly like he had sprinted up every step in the castle, Harry had gone pale and his eyes had glazed over. With the headmaster's voice he shook his head and looked at him in triumph. "That's where my Mum, found the runespoor shield!" Harry said excitedly.

"Lily? I don't remember Lily visiting Burkina Faso." Dumbledore frowned.

Snape made a sniff through his overly large nose but Harry ignored him. "Neville told me the scrofungulus strain I had last summer, came from Burkina Faso." Harry saw the understanding in the old wizard's blue eyes. "The spoors were on my Mum's school letters that she had sent to my aunt the same time she sent the trunk with the runespoor."

"I think that is a very reasonable assumption." Dumbledore nodded.

"Headmaster, when one assumes anything, you make an ass out of you and me." Snape sneered.

"Even so Severus." Dumbledore conceded. "It is the best guess we have."

Snape eyed him for a moment then said slowly. "And what are we to do with such a guess, Headmaster?"

"That Severus is a very good question." Dumbledore sighed then frowned. "This will require a bit of thought."

"I have to get her back." Harry insisted, staring at Dumbledore trying to read what the old wizard was thinking, which proved as futile as trying to trick him.

"Harry I do intended to find the runespoor and shield." Dumbledore assured him. Snape snorted again.

"I wish you luck Headmaster." Snape gave him a small bow of his head. "If there is no more need for me I will return to my quarters. Good evening." Snape opened the door to leave.

"I really should go too." Harry sighed. "I have a ton of homework to catch up."

"Good night to you both then." Dumbledore said as he sat down at his desk, still deep in thought.

"Good night Professor." Harry closed the door behind him and stepped on the moving stairs behind Snape. Neither spoke as they rode the moving stairs down and stepped out into the corridor or as they walked on down the corridor to go their separate ways. Harry almost ran into the back of Snape because the potion master had stopped dead when he had come to the staircase that led down to the first floor and up to the third.

Before Harry could ask what was wrong, a meow came from the top of the stairs. Cleo sat in the flickering torch light staring at Snape. Puzzled as to why Snape would be so shaken by a cat, Harry cleared his throat. "Professor?"

"To whom does that cat belong to?" Snape continued the staring contest with the cat.

“Ginny Weasley.” Harry looked to the cat and Snape then back at the cat again. “She won’t hurt you. Come here Spy Cat.” He put out a hand and called.

“I was not worried she would injure me Potter. “ Snape stepped back as Cleo came purring to Harry. “Over the last week this cat has been showing up seemingly everywhere I go.” He frowned as Harry picked her up. Cleo climbed to Harry’s shoulder and stared at Snape again.

“When I get the runespoor back, I’ll ask Hapa what Cleo wants from you. She speaks cat.” Harry said.

“Of course she does.” Snape said derisively. “I’ll wait in my quarters if you don’t mind.” With those words Snape swept down the steps, his robes billowing as he hurried off.

“That’s pretty good Spy Cat.” Harry stroked the black fur as he climbed the stairs. “Out staring Snape, not many can do that.”

“Cleo!” Ginny caught the cat as she jumped from Harry’s shoulder to Ginny who was sitting at a table in the Gryffindor common room with books stacked around her. “Where did you find her?”

“She found me.” Harry said. “Hang on let me get my books.” He sprinted up to the dorm. In a short time Harry returned out of breath with his school bag slung over his shoulder and the book that Ginny had given him for Christmas in his hands.

“Doing some family research?” Ginny asked just as Ron and Hermione came over to sit with them.

Before Harry could answer her Ron asked. “Let’s have it Harry. What was the big secret you couldn’t tell at dinner?” He sat down and Hermione took a seat beside him.

Harry looked around and pulled out a chair beside Ginny and sat down. Quickly and quietly he told them of the runespoor being missing and of tonight about looking into Snape’s though in the pensive. “When Dumbledore said runespoors came from Burkina

Faso it was like a light flicked on in my brain.” Harry continued to tell them about remembering what Neville had said about his illness.

“Wow Harry. That was really good deducting work.” Hermione said. “I can’t think why Snape wouldn’t agree with it.”

“Another thing.” Harry turned to Ginny. “Cleo has been dogging Snape. He said she turns up almost everywhere he goes.”

”Why would she do that?” Ginny stroked the cat in her lap.

“That’s another thing I can ask the runespoor when we find her.” Harry said absentmindedly tapping the cover of *A Tree Grows in Every Pot. A Potter Family History*. By J.K. Potter.

“What did are you looking up in that?” Hermione asked pointing to the book.

“Oh yeah. I didn’t get a chance to ask Snape or Dumbledore.” Harry flipped open the book to the index page. “Just before I entered Snape’s memory, he was looking at a clock face and the name F Potter was written on the face.” Harry turned the page and ran his finger down through the names. “Like a maker’s name or something.”

“Maybe one of your relatives was a clock maker.” Hermione suggested stretching her neck trying to read the index

“And when I visited my parents’ graves,” Harry felt a strange pang saying that. “I saw a headstone with the name Fredrick Potter on it but no dates at all.”

“Maybe he’s the same F. Potter.” Ginny said excitedly. “Have you found it yet?” She leaned on Harry’s arm to read with him. “There.” She put her finger on the page.

“Yes.” Harry said triumphantly. “Page twenty-three.” He turned the pages then read aloud. “Fredrick Potter born 521 A.D. Disappeared in 655 and was not heard of again.” Harry’s face fell. “I hoped it would tell more.”

“At least it explains why there was no date on the tombstone.” Ron said.

“But why didn’t they put the date of birth?” Harry wondered aloud, closing the Potter book.

“It was a long time ago, perhaps they did things differently.” Hermione said, getting out her books to do homework. The others followed suit and for a long time nothing but scratching of quills and tired sighs came from the three of them. Hermione never seemed to tire of homework.

Reading in his charms book, Harry slowly slipped his right hand into Ginny’s. He saw a smile creep on to her face. After finishing a scroll, Ginny pulled out her charms book and said. “I’m going to read. I think sit on the couch. It will be more comfortable.” She got up still holding Harry’s hand pulling him with her.

“You know that’s a very good idea.” Harry laughed more at the look on Ron’s face then Ginny’s sorry excuse to sit closer to him.

As the evening grew late the common room slowly emptied. Hermione finally got up and gave Ron a quick peck on the cheek and said goodnight. Harry had long ago stopped reading and was now just waiting for Ron to go to bed. But the redhead was practically asleep at the table Harry noted when he glanced over his shoulder to see if Ron was packing up.

“Ron, go to bed.” Harry said sharply when he saw Ron’s head drop toward the table.

“I’m awake.” Ron shook his head and pulled his book closer.

“If you think Ginny and I need a chaperone, I’ll be yours and Hermione’s.” Harry warned. Ginny stifled a laugh.

“I wasn’t....I was just going to bed.” Ron stuffed everything in sight in his bag then disappeared without a word up the boys’ stairs.

"I didn't think he would ever leave." Ginny sighed and flushed a bit when she looked at Harry.

"Now don't get all shy with me." Harry gently took her hand and rubbed it between his.

"I'm not." Ginny leaned against him and sighed. "It's just that look in your eyes."

"And what look would that be." Harry turned to gaze into her brown eyes.

"Sort of predatory." Ginny grinned.

"Well, you are quite delicious." Harry leaned closer and kissed her lips. "Very tasty." He felt her arms go around his neck.

"You talk way too much." Ginny pulled his head to meet her lips again and Harry felt his insides melt. A full month of anticipating holding Ginny again welled up in Harry as they kissed and he pulled her as close. She ran her fingers through his hair Harry growled with pleasure. When they pulled apart a bit to catch their breath Harry was surprised to find Ginny sitting on his lap.

"I missed you so much." Ginny whispered laying her head on his shoulder and running her hand over his chest and arms. "You've really got solid muscle."

"I missed you too." Harry ran his hand down her back and across her arm. "You're very soft." He swallowed hard. "I love touching you." Ginny gazed at him and stroked his cheek.

"You never really had anybody to hold on to did you?" Ginny's voice caught and she blinked hard. "I can't imagine not having someone you could turn to."

"And you can't imagine how wonderful this feels to me." Harry took her hand and fitted his palm to hers then sensuously massaged her palm and fingers. "Just touching you is." He swallowed hard and

sighed. "Total bliss." He grinned to lighten his words. A worried look had crossed Ginny's face.

"Is it enough?" Ginny asked gazing at him. "Just touching and kissing. You've obviously thought of doing more..." she blushed.

"Of course I have." Harry laughed. "I'm a guy. It's what we do."

"Not only guys think about it." Ginny protested then blushed deeper, still with a troubled look on her face.

"I suppose not." Harry conceded trying to figure out what she was really on her mind. "Do you want to?"

"Sometimes." Ginny whispered. "It's so confusing." She looked down at her hand in Harry's.

"Tell me what's confusing about it?" Harry put his arm back around her and pulled Ginny against him. "What's has you worried?" He started rubbing her back trying to get her to relax.

"I'm not sure. I want to but I want to wait but then when we kiss like this I really want to." Ginny blurted out. "I know you want to."

"Yes, I want to." Harry pulled Ginny away from him so he could see her face. He smoothed the hair out of her eyes and said. "But until there are no buts in your wanting to, I can wait." Harry looked directly in her eyes. "If you ever feel pressured by me tell me to back off. I know you have a voice so use it. Okay?"

Ginny nodded, a slight smile played at her lips and Harry thought he had succeeded in dispelling her fears but she closed her eyes and sighed. He waited until she opened her eyes and he looked at her questioningly. "Sometimes I want too so much. I know I should wait, especially until after the exams. Then other times I think I should just get it over with so I wouldn't have to worry about it any more."

"That's a bit insulting." Harry said. "Just getting it over with...like a test."

"I didn't mean it to be." Ginny's brow furrowed. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to explain it."

"I think I can. Your dad said I'd have to be the strong one." Harry hugged her to him again. "I think the only person putting pressure on you is you. I won't deny I would love to...in Ron's vernacular 'shag you senseless' but I will not wither away if we don't. The way I see it when we finally cross that bridge the other side will be very green indeed."

"Anticipation?" Ginny lifted her head from his shoulder to look at him. "Mum said anticipation is what makes things even better." She looked thoughtful and stared into his eyes. "I know some girls in my year that have gone all the way and it seems like that's all they do with their boyfriends."

"And that's wrong because?" Harry raised his eyebrows trying to appear innocently ignorant then grinned. Ginny giggled and hugged him.

"It doesn't seem like it should be the focal point of a relationship." Ginny said tentatively.

"Just sometimes?" Harry pleaded.

Ginny laughed again but looked at him sternly. "Can't you be serious? I'm glad we're able to talk about things." Ginny said soberly.

Harry put his hands on her cheeks and gazed intently into her eyes. "So am I. And I'll say this to avoid any misunderstanding. Never ever think I don't want you. But never ever think you have to give yourself to me to keep me happy or keep me loving you."

Tears filled her brown eyes and Ginny flung her arms around his neck. "You do understand!" She kissed his cheek. "I was beginning to wonder."

"I'm not that thick." Harry closed his eyes as she kissed his neck. "You have too many brothers for me not to understand. Ouch."

Vampire!” He laughed and started tickling her after she had nipped his neck. Ginny caught his hands and tried to pull them away from her waist when Harry proved too strong she tried tickling him.

“That’s no fair you aren’t ticklish.” Ginny squirmed off his lap and soon found herself pinned.

“Your dad isn’t here to interrupt us this time.” Harry grinned down at her then nuzzled her neck. Ginny giggled and put her arms around his neck.

“Ahem.” Ron’s voice came from the boy’s stairs.

Harry looked up to see an angry fist heading toward him. His seeker reflexes caught the fist and held it tightly. “Ron stop.” He slid off the couch still holding Ron’s clenched hand.

“Stay off my sister.” Ron said angrily. “I can’t believe you! The second I left...” He tried to pull his hand away but couldn’t.

“Ron, it’s none of your business.” Ginny said hotly standing beside Harry.

“When I caught you and Hermione should I have slugged you?” Harry asked.

“She isn’t your sister!” Ron glared but a guilty look flashed across his face.

“She’s the closest thing I have to sister.” Harry said firmly. “I trust you not to hurt her Ron. Trust me.” He finished simply. Harry felt the tension leave Ron’s arm and he released his fist. “What are you doing back down here anyway?”

Ron snorted and held out a piece of parchment. “I accidentally put this in my bag. Sorry Harry. I just over reacted, especially after reading this.” He shoved the parchment closer to Harry’s face.

The light of the fire made the page readable and Ginny gasped and grabbed it quickly, her face bright red. Harry burst out laughing and Ron grinned then snickered to see his sister embarrassed.

“Good night Mr. and Mrs. Harry J. Potter.” Ron smirked and left back up the stairs while Harry was still laughing and Ginny had begun swatting him with the rolled up parchment.

Author's Notes: I love reviews!! Thanks all!

Someone just asked if the runespoor was a real fictional snake (I just had to use that wording LOL.) I found the creature in Rowling's book Fantastic Beasts and Where to find Them by Newt Salamander.

The mistake isn't:

Neville's birthday. I found out after I had written that his was the 30th but being so close I didn't think it was so ill-conceived that their parents would celebrate together.

No godmother. Again I found this out after I had written one in but Alice Longbottom is hardly a 'real godmother' being how she's mentally gone, so that isn't it.

Harry's patronus is a stag not his animagus form.

If Hermione's parents take a magical port key into the castle I pretty sure they could see it.

Mark Evens being at Hogwarts, I guess I should have read more of JK's interviews. But that isn't the mistake I'm talking about.

It isn't that Dumbledore didn't go to Hogwarts the same time as McGonagall. The age thing was in an interview too.

The video they watched at Christmas, video cameras were around in 1981 and being wizards of course they could get it to play on today's VCRs even if it wasn't the same format.

Neville's Gran did send him a howler in fact we know of at least two. Before Ron opened his Neville said he had gotten one once and waited and it was horrible. And in PoA when Neville left the list of passwords lying around his gran sent another howler.

Did I write that Fudge sent Sirius to Azkaban? I re-read things (scanned it) and couldn't find where I had written this. If I did that is a mistake but not the one I found. LOL But I'll say you are warm to feeling a bit sweaty about the information coming from the third book.

Mad-Eye is a retired Auror, He is isn't he? Hummm, uhhh.... he came out of retirement to guard Harry for a while. So that's not it.

Mistake clue for this chapter: It occurs before Chapter 40.

Clues from other chapters.

It occurs after Chapter 25.

The information can be found in one of the first three books, not in an interview

It involves someone who has been to number twelve Grimmauld Place

Chapter 51

The next day Harry and Ron ignored each other. Hermione kept giving them exasperated looks but kept her mouth shut. For which Harry was thankful. He didn't need her telling him he should see Ron's side of the situation. Harry understood Ron was protective of Ginny. What Ron didn't see was Harry felt the same, that he would never hurt her intentionally.

When Harry arrived early for quidditch practice that evening, thinking he take the time to fly his Firebolt before training since it had been so long, Ron was sitting on a bench already dressed for practice and appeared to be waiting for him.

"I think we should talk." Ron said without preamble. He stood up to face Harry.

"Fine." Harry set his broomstick down on the bench.

"First, I want to say I'm sorry about last night, Harry." Ron flushed but met Harry's eyes. "I know I was way out of line. I just saw you on top of Ginny and kind of freaked."

"Apology accepted." Harry put out his hand and shook Ron's with a grin. "I'm glad your dad didn't react in the same way."

"What?" Ron's eyes grew big.

"He caught us in the library at headquarters and just talked to me about responsibility and stuff." Harry fought to keep from laughing as Ron's face went through what it seemed like every emotion possible.

"What were you doing?" Ron finally croaked. "No, don't answer I don't want to know." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then Ron opened his eyes to meet Harry's again. "Secondly I wanted to say; what you said about trusting me not to hurt Hermione and her being like a sister to you, well it really hit home. I do trust you Harry. And Ginny couldn't do better than my best mate as a boyfriend."

"Thanks Ron." Harry felt his throat tighten. "That means a lot to me. And I couldn't be happier for you and Hermione."

"I'm not saying I might not go off the deep end again if I see you two snogging but I will be sorry for it afterwards." Ron said seriously.

"As long as you apologize this sweetly I think I can forgive you." Harry laughed as he started to change into his quidditch robes.

"Alright." Ron snorted. "That's enough of that."

"I'll say." Harry agreed. "Let's get down to what's really important." He held up his firebolt. Ron grinned and held up his broom. "Quidditch!" They both said together. Laughing they slapped each other on the shoulder and headed out to the field.

No amount of arguing from Ron could convince Harry to take back being the captain of the Gryffindor quidditch team. "Next year Ron. You finish the year and I'll take it back next year. It's only right."

"I suppose I should humor you." Ron sneered.

"Yeah, you do that." Harry smirked back zipping past him on his broom. The rest of the team arrived for practice and Harry felt euphoric as he flew his Firebolt after the snitch. He seemed know which way the snitch would turn before it did so. Flying on his broom after flying as a phoenix felt strange but Harry could tell he flew even better than before. It was like the air spoke to him. He knew by the feel of the wind rushing by him how the current would affect his flying and Harry adjusted his path. Or just a slight whisper of a down draft and he knew the snitch would drop.

Adding to his euphoria wasn't the relief of being released after a long confinement but the lack of pain in his scar. Freedom from the dull ever present ache was worth a month in solitary to Harry. He just hoped Voldemort would stay quiet for the rest of the school year.

Easily, Harry fell back into the routine of his classes, even though he had extra work. At his next animagus training session with Professor McGonagall on Thursday, Harry asked her. "When is it official that I'm an animagus, Professor?"

"When you have passed the test." McGonagall looked through her spectacles at him. "You were supposed to read the regulations before you sent in the application."

"I did. Well, I skimmed it." Harry admitted.

The stern witch stared at him reproachfully for a moment. "To officially become an animagus, one must spend twenty-four hours in their animagus form."

"That wouldn't be hard." Harry said eagerly. "I could do that now."

"Then one must remain human for one full week." Professor McGonagall added firmly.

"Oh." Harry said deflated then brightened. "That shouldn't be too hard. I've been human all my life." He grinned at her.

"Sounds easy does it?" Her thin lips pursed in contempt. "It took me three attempts to pass Potter." Harry's eyes widen.

"Three tries?" Harry's heart sank. If it had taken stiff, disciplined McGonagall three attempts, how long was it going to take him?"

"My suggestion Potter," McGonagall's lips twitched as if she was fighting a grin. "If you spend the last day here in your animagus form, when you leave Hogwarts the next day, you will not be allowed to do magic so it should be easy for you to maintain your human form."

A broad smile broke Harry's face. "You had that worked out all along didn't you?" He laughed.

"You might not pay attention to details Harry but you do have friends who see to them for you." McGonagall gave him a rare smile. "I was

much older and didn't have the restrictions as you do to make it easy for you to pass."

"But isn't it a bit like cheating?" Harry asked still smiling.

"Not at all Potter. It is merely a test of controlling oneself." McGonagall said slyly. "Now get out, I have papers to grade." She shook her hands at him and turned to her papers.

"Thanks Professor. For everything." Harry said, picked up his bag and left to find Ginny.

Later that evening, Harry headed for his meeting with Dumbledore feeling hopeful about the headmaster's ability to think of a way to find the runespoor. But Harry froze in surprise when he entered the headmaster's office. Snape sat by the desk looking sullen and very angry. Pure hatred reflected from the potions master's eyes when they flicked toward Harry. Dumbledore wore deep blue robes and leaned back against his desk as he stood in front of Snape.

"Sit down Harry." Dumbledore said gently but Harry heard the strained patience in his voice.

"What's wrong Professor?" Harry asked studying the old wizard's face.

"Nothing is wrong." Dumbledore patted his shoulder and walked around the desk to sit down as Harry took a seat. He glanced at Snape who seemed determined not to look at him again then he gazed back at Dumbledore.

"I have an idea to recover the shield and runespoor. Dumbledore ignored Snape's disapproving grumble. Harry slid to the edge of his seat to hear more.

"Since you are the only one who can speak with the runespoor you must go." Dumbledore stated.

"To Burkina Faso? I don't mind." Harry said eagerly.

"I knew you wouldn't." Dumbledore said without smiling which made Harry nervous. "The thing is Harry, you are still an underage wizard and once you leave the Hogwarts grounds you can not risk the ministry bring charges against you for extra curricular activities outside the school."

"No." Harry agreed. "But my birthday isn't that far off."

"I do not think it is wise to wait that long to find her." Dumbledore said. "The longer we wait the chance of Voldemort hearing the shield is missing increases. So I have asked Professor Snape to accompany you this weekend to Burkina Faso."

"I'm sorry Professor. What did you say?" Harry shook his head slightly as if to clear his ears.

"The headmaster said Potter, you and I will travel to Burkina Faso to find the runespoor shield." Snape's voice was dripping with a mixture of anger, hatred and contempt.

"But why him?" Harry stood up his anger flaring more than it had in a long time. "Why couldn't Remus go with me or you?"

"I have a meeting with the International Confederation of Wizards which I can not miss. More important, Professor Snape is familiar with the runespoor." Dumbledore explained. "She obeyed him when he asked her to take the shield to his quarters. If she were to hear his voice or feel his presence perhaps she would seek him out thinking you might be with him."

The pounding of blood in Harry's ears made the headmaster's voice dull and thick. But unfortunately what Harry had heard made sense.

"Do not think I have volunteered willingly Potter." Snape seethed. Turning to gaze at Snape, Harry matched the dark eyes in loathing. He heard Dumbledore sigh in frustration.

"I know the two of you can get along for two days." Dumbledore said. "Because there will not be time for arguments. Burkina Faso is a

small country but the forests set aside for the runespoors' use are unplottable."

"So how are we to even find where she might be?" Harry turned back to Dumbledore.

"Our only hope Harry, albeit a small one, is for you to make contact with local snakes or runespoor and perhaps acquire information from them.

"I suppose that might work." Harry's heart sank. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

"A fool's plan if I ever heard one." Snape sneered.

"No doubt. But still worthy of trying nevertheless." Dumbledore said firmly and gave Snape a look that forestalled any further comments.

"When do we go?" Harry asked feeling slightly numb. Two whole days alone with Snape!

"Saturday morning just before daybreak." Dumbledore said. "You will take a port key to an area I know runespoors to have been seen."

"Do you need me any further Headmaster?" Snape asked sullenly standing up.

"Only one thing I wish from you, Severus. Go in good heart." Dumbledore pleaded and met the man's eyes.

"I will go headmaster because you have asked me." Snape inclined his head to Dumbledore. "But do not expect me to be happy about it." Snape gave Harry a glare as if it was entirely his fault then swept from the room. A large sigh came from Dumbledore.

"Professor?" Harry looked questioningly at the old wizard.

"Harry, I know what you are going to ask but I trust Severus Snape with my life." Dumbledore who had been staring at the door after

Snape's departure shifted his eyes to meet Harry's. "And I trust him with yours."

"Two days?" Ron gasped loudly.

"Shut up." Harry hissed and glanced around the crowded Gryffindor common room. Even Hermione looked concerned after Harry had told them of his pending trip with Snape.

"Two days with Snape?" Ron mouthed but no sound came out, utter horror on his face.

"Well, he is a member of the Order." Hermione said slowly. "So you will be fine."

"Fine?" Harry gritted his teeth. "It's going to be a living nightmare Hermione."

"Remember Harry it takes two to argue." Hermione said.

"I don't want to argue with him." Harry said sighing.

"Good because remember what you said about driving him crazy by being nice to him?" Hermione asked then advised. "Just keep reminding yourself."

"I suppose all that really matters is I get the runespoor back." Harry considered.

"And the shield." Ron whispered.

"I would settle for Hapa, Giza, and Kesho." Harry said solemnly. "I miss them." He looked at the empty seat beside him and commented. "I miss Ginny."

"She's in the library. It's not too late, you could go meet her." Hermione said kindly.

"I went there before I came here." Harry sighed and gave Hermione a wry smile. "She politely told me to leave because I was too much of a distraction."

"You should take that as a compliment Harry." Hermione laughed.

"I suppose." Harry pulled out his homework. Without a defense against the dark arts class Harry was doing fairly well getting caught up with all his classes, transfiguration still being very easy for him. Harry wished his charms were as simple. All during the time they would have been in Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harry had tried and tried to charm ropes into looping themselves into different knots but slowly his ropes transfigured into snakes, which did not like being tied into knots.

At breakfast on Friday Harry sat hunched picking at his breakfast and gulping his tea trying to wake up. He had slept badly. Dreams of Snape leaving him out in the middle of nowhere had kept him up most of the night. After the third nightmare where he was clinging to Snape's robes begging him not to leave him alone again, Harry woke abruptly. Feeling disgusted with himself, Harry got out of bed and went to his trunk. He opened the lid and gently took his baby things out of his mother's trunk then he picked up the two books by Sigeric Snape and climbed back into bed. After he had made sure the heavy scarlet drapes were shut Harry lit his wand. "Lumos." He whispered.

Carefully he opened the one book, Power of the Shadow, and started reading. When he had scanned the books, after he had first opened the trunk, Harry had found the theory hard to grasp. But as he had expected, Voldemort's use of him made the book crystal clear now. As he read, Harry knew without even trying he could do the spells in the book. Most of the spells were very similar to spells taught at Hogwarts. So why were these spells 'wrong' and why were the other spells 'right'? Harry pondered. Where does the magic in this book cross the line? Why did he need these books? Harry sighed wishing his mother would have been more explicit in her explanation of the trunk. Harry read until he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer then

shoved the books under his pillow and drifted off into a thankfully dreamless sleep for two hours rest before he had to get up.

Ron's voice roused him out of his stupor.

"Who are you for?" Ron asked a strange grey owl in front of him. Harry had not even heard the morning's rush of owls. The owl held out a leg and Ron took off the letter but instead of flying off the owl dipped its bill in to Ron's cereal for a cornflake. "It's from Dad." He ripped open the envelope and pulled out the letter. He scanned it then his face went pale. "Oh no."

"What?" Harry felt fully awake now expecting the worse.

"What is it Ron?" Hermione tried to lean in and read with him.

'Errol is dead. Dad said he got up Wednesday morning and found him on the kitchen floor on his back his legs straight up in the air.' Ron blinked hard and muttered. "Poor Errol. This is our new family owl, Max."

"I'm really sorry about Errol Ron." Hermione put her arm through his and giving him a squeeze.

"Oh thanks." Ron swallowed then shrugged. "He was old."

"But that doesn't mean you won't miss him." Hermione watched the redhead's face intently.

"I suppose I will." Ron pushed the grey owl away from his cornflakes. "Keep eating like that and you won't get off the ground." He scowled at it. "Go on, you've done your bit." The owl snapped at Ron's fingers and flew off with a loud hoot.

"That's rough Ron." Harry said cautiously. "Does your dad have any other news?" He asked as Ron started to read the rest of the letter.

"Hang on." Ron's voice brightened. "Listen to this. Yesterday one of Fred and George's traps went off and it had caught Wormtail!"

"What?" Harry gasped. "That's great. I wonder why Dumbledore didn't tell me last night."

"What are they doing with him?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"Says here; they are keeping him at headquarters in a small cage with an unbreakable charm on it so he can't get out." Ron read. "Well that's good news. Do you want to give this to Ginny to read, Harry?"

"She's in the library." Harry sighed. "You better give it to her. I just get her all flustered. Ginny is really beginning to feel the pressure of O. W. L.s. She was studying in the common room this morning and all I said was hi and she spilt a bottle of ink all over her notes."

"But that doesn't mean you caused it." Hermione defended him.

"Then she broke three quills and set her History of Magic book on fire." Harry smiled ruefully. "After she put the fire out Ginny shoved all her stuff in her bag and said she was going to the library and told me to go to breakfast." He sighed again.

"Oh." Hermione said trying hard not to laugh. "We better go."

The three headed off for Transfiguration. At first Harry had thought the day would drag on and on, because of his lack of sleep. But the pending trip with Snape caused time to fly by at twice the normal rate. Before he knew it Harry was leaving the great hall after dinner and had just started up the stairs when Professor Dumbledore called to him.

"Harry, a word if you please." The headmaster motioned him into the antechamber off the entrance hall. Harry followed the old wizard into the room and shut the door. "I have made an emergency port key for you." Dumbledore pulled out an old iron key. "If anything happens to Professor Snape the activation is 'Moony's Night'." When Harry's eyebrows rose Dumbledore smiled. "I had to think of something neither you nor Professor Snape are likely to say in casual conversation."

“Okay.” Harry reached out to take the key and gave a deep sigh. “I don’t know Professor.”

“Trust me Harry.” Dumbledore said then a flash of guilt crossed the old face. He sighed and looked down. “I have no right to ask that of you.”

“I do trust you.” Harry said earnestly. “It’s Snape who has me worried.”

The old wizard considered Harry for a long moment. “When you have doubts, Harry, think of Professor Snape in Voldemort’s dungeon. Remember the pain he has felt by the same hand that causes your pain.”

Nodding Harry reluctantly did feel a bit sympathetic toward Snape in that situation. “I’ll try, Professor.”

“You will come here in the morning. I will have a pack ready with the supplies you will need.” Dumbledore told him. “Dress lightly, Burkina Faso is very hot this time a year.”

“Hermione told me.” Harry said. “She said the rainy season is just beginning.”

“Even so it is still likely to be hot.” Dumbledore said then sighed. “I know, as Professor Snape said, this is a fool’s plan and the chance of it succeeding is slim but I do not know what else to try.”

Harry watched the old face change from resigned helplessness to a frown and felt he knew what Dumbledore was going to say next. “Professor, it isn’t so far fetched. There will be probably thousands of snakes in the area we go to and at least one of them is likely to have heard something about a huge runespoor.” Harry caught the headmaster’s eyes. “So don’t back out now.”

Dumbledore gave him a sharp look and a sad smile replaced his frown. “Trying a bit of legitimacy on me Harry? You are correct. I was having second thoughts on the sanity of this plan.”

“What sanity. With a lunatic like Voldemort at large we have to be as insane as he is at times.” Harry snorted.

“Perhaps.” Dumbledore said slowly as he reached for the doorknob. Then the headmaster looked at him with a puzzled expression when Harry stared at him. “What is it?”

“Just for a moment.” Harry grinned. “You sounded a lot like Snape.” The old wizard chuckled and clapped Harry on the shoulder. He opened the door and they walked into the entrance hall.

“He does rub off on a person.” Dumbledore smiled and the twinkle returned to his blue eyes. “Just don’t let him rub you the wrong way. Good night Harry and good luck.”

“Good night Professor.” Harry sighed then made his way up the many stairs to Gryffindor tower. He could have flown but Harry hoped he would be physically tired so he would sleep better when he finally climbed into bed.

The dormitory buzzed with Neville’s and Ron’s snores when Harry woke before dawn. Harry dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, both fitting snuggler than he remembered when purchased last summer. He reached for his trainers then changed his mind and went to his trunk at the foot of his bed. After lifting several things out Harry found the boots he had received for his birthday. He closed the lid of the trunk and sat down on it to put on the boots. The supple leather conformed to his feet and Harry smiled in satisfaction when he crossed the floor to the door not making a sound.

At the bottom of the stairs Harry tripped on something and fell hard on the common room floor. In the dim light of a single lamp Harry saw someone rise from the couch. “Ginny?”

“Harry, are you okay? I just wanted to say good-by.” Ginny helped him up. “Cleo was supposed to be watching for you, not trip you.” She was blinking hard.

"I'm alright. Don't cry Ginny." Harry pulled her close and hugged her tightly. "It's only two days."

"I know. I promised myself I wouldn't blubber." Ginny took a couple of deep breaths. "Good luck Harry. I really hope you find the runespoor."

"Thanks." Harry gave her a kiss. "I better go. You know how Snape is about being on time."

"Take care." Ginny waved as Harry gave her a backward glance after climbing out of the portrait hole.

The hot arid air felt harsh to Harry when he and Snape appeared in a corner of a dry savannah. A few sparse gnarled trees with small waxy leaves dotted the area. The sun, peeking over the horizon, bathed the land in a rosy glow as Harry shifted the backpack the two of them would share and looked expectantly at Snape.

"We have discussed what you should do Potter, so get on with it." Snape looked annoyed at the layer of dust already settling on his black shoes and the hem of his robes.

Why did he have to be so Snapish all the time? Harry thought angrily as he concentrated on a weed. It reminded him of a snake as it swayed in the hot breeze. "Uh hello? Any snakes about?" Harry glanced at Snape to make sure he was speaking parseltongue and not English. Snape didn't stop him so Harry continued. "I would like to speak to you. Please come out." Harry listened intently for any answering hiss then shook his head at Snape.

"Try again, louder." Snape ordered.

Taking a deep breath Harry called as loudly as he could. "Any serpents around here? I won't hurt you. I just want to talk to you. Please answer." Dead silence followed and Harry said. "Nothing."

"We will proceed as planned." Snape turned and started walking. Harry shifted the pack again and strode after the billowing black robes.

Isn't he hot? Harry wondered as they kept a steady pace for ten minutes. Sweat ran down Harry's temple and he could feel a trickle down the center of his back. And he was only wearing a t-shirt and jeans.

Whenever Snape stopped Harry repeated his plea for a snake to speak to him. This was their only hope and they continued walking and stopping for several hours. When the sun was fully up and already at a scorching intensity, Snape said they would take a rest and surveyed Harry critically.

"Your idiocy never ceases to amaze me Potter." Snape said contemptuously as he settled in the narrow shade of a dead tree.

"What?" Harry scowled and let the backpack ease to the ground. He was too hot to be polite.

"Have you never heard of a cooling charm?" Snape stared at Harry's sweat soaked shirt.

"But I'm not allowed to do any magic outside Hogwarts." Harry took a conservative sip from the water flask he carried.

"Why did you not perform the charm before we left Hogwarts? Snape paused to take a long drink from his flask. "And you need not worry about running out of water. These containers refill when the cap is replaced."

Feeling totally stupid Harry gulped the water down then poured some over his head. "I am an idiot." Harry grudgingly agreed with Snape and glanced at the yellow sun still hanging low on the horizon. "Too late now. I plead insanity due to being raised by muggles." Harry sighed then he heard Snape snort. Was that a laugh? Did Snape just laugh at something he, Harry had said?

The unlikely pair continued walking and stopping as the sun rose in a hazy blur above their heads. Neither spoke other than when Harry made his plea for a snake to answer him. Snape made a beeline towards a clump of trees in the distance. The land rolled a little but was mostly flat and as dry as dust. When they had reached the edge of the wood Snape stopped and looked around.

"I suppose we should stop and eat something." The pale man said pointing to some rocks near a stump of a tree. He gave Harry the look he had been using all morning when Snape had wanted him to repeat his snake call. Harry shook his head after making several requests for a snake to speak to him. Snape sat down on the hard soil and leaned his back against a large rock.

"I can't believe no snake has heard me." Harry said angrily as he took off the pack and opened it. Inside he found several sandwiches and he pulled out four and handed two to Snape. He propped the pack against a smaller rock and sat down so he could lean back against it.

"How human." Snape sneered as he chewed thoughtfully on a bite. He swallowed. "Just because you want to talk to a snake doesn't mean it wants to or has any reason to speak with you."

"I suppose not." Harry mumbled between mouthfuls. He was famished. They had left so early he had not eaten breakfast. They ate in silence. Harry had learned in his many hours in Snape's quarters small talk was not necessary or wanted by the potion's master. Then Harry remembered the snake speak potion and the potion timer. He started to ask about these things but decided to wait until later, perhaps when they made camp for the night. Maybe Snape would be too tired to be surly.

The rest of the day was more of the same, walking, calling and listening. As the sun sank and turned blood red, frustrated by not a sound from the local snakes Harry said loudly in parseltongue. "I don't care if you stay and talk, just answer me so I know I'm being heard."

"We should set up a camp for the night before it gets dark." Snape pointed to several trees arranged in a rough circle and led the way

toward them. The moment Snape put a foot inside the circle he froze and held out an arm to prevent Harry from entering.

“What?” Harry whispered.

“Quiet.” Snape said sharply and stayed perfectly still as if listening or waiting for something to happen. After several intense minutes Snape finally relaxed and stepped into the circle with both feet. “Don’t you feel it Potter?” He turned to gaze at Harry. “This is a magic circle.” Harry entered the area and instantly he felt what Snape was talking about.

“Yes, I feel it.” Harry glanced around as Snape had done. “But it feels good, not dangerous.”

“Which should put you more on your guard, Potter.” Snape stared at each tree in turn as if trying to make it crack under pressure and start confessing why this ring existed. He frowned and gazed suspiciously around again.

“What now?” Harry asked, wondering if Snape would decide to leave and make camp at a different place.

“It has an oddly familiar feel, the magic here.” Snape said cryptically. “But I do not think it will do us any harm.” He motioned for Harry to take the pack off. “There should be a tent inside.” Snape pointed his wand at the pack and it unzipped. A tent flew out and pitched itself. With the next flick of his wand Snape made a small fire. Then the potion’s master pointed his wand at each tree mumbling under his breath as he moved his wand from tree to tree. Harry was pretty sure it was a protective charm but he wasn’t going to ask.

Again they ate a silent meal. Harry looked over to Snape once to ask his questions but the flames danced shadows across the pale face making Snape look more sinister than ever. It took Harry another ten minutes to get up the courage to ask Snape. “Where did you get the potion timer?”

Snape had been staring into the fire but the dark eyes lifted to gaze at Harry. “It was in my parents’ house as long as I can remember.”

Despite the hot night air Harry felt a chill wash over him as he remembered Sirius saying 'With so few purebloods left we're all related in some way.' Could it be possible his ancestry mingled with Snape's?

"Do you know anything about the maker?" Harry refrained from mentioning the name Potter.

"No. Curious is it not?" Snape went back to staring at the fire. "As a teen I wanted to destroy it but my father would not allow me to do so." He shifted and leaned against the sleeping bag behind him. "And despite how I feel about the name of Potter, it is innately useful."

Letting out a held breath quietly, Harry gazed at the potion's master wondering how much he could ask without getting his head bit off.

"Without the timer I could not have brewed the snake speech potion." Snape commented.

"You finished it?" Harry felt a thrill of hope.

"No Potter, it is not finished." Snape sneered. "The last ingredient is still unattainable."

"Oh yeah, I forgot, three hairs from a muggle parselmouth." Harry sighed. His thoughts turned to his mother's trunk and the dark magic books inside. He was deep in thought when Snape spoke.

"You told me why you did not take potions Potter. But I overheard Professor McGonagall telling the headmaster your career ambition was to become an Auror. Something highly unlikely without NEWT level potions or did you think you would become an Auror on your name alone?" Snape was now staring at him when Harry glanced up from gazing into the glowing logs.

"Do you know as much about the prophecy as Voldemort?" Harry flinched as Snape spat.

"Do not say his name."

"Sorry." Harry was too tired to be angry back at Snape and tried. "You know as much as he does I assume?" He received a curt nod. Carefully Harry considered his words and told the potion's master. "In the end, it's going to be me or him. If it is him I really don't need potions. If it's me..." Harry sighed. "I think I'll be done with hunting dark wizards."

"And if you do manage to vanquish the Dark Lord, how could the ministry refuse you as an Auror." Snape finished to Harry's surprise.

"Something like that." Harry nodded.

"Interesting logic Potter, almost worthy of a Slytherin." Snape stretched his arms above his head and yawned.

"Now don't be insulting we were getting along so well." Harry sneered then returned to his dark thoughts. "Professor?" Harry swallowed hard. This next question might bring Snape's temper to the surface. "Do you know a lot about the dark arts?"

"More than is socially acceptable." Snape smirked.

A smirk was good. Harry thought, much better than anger or shouting. Harry took a deep breath.

"Before you ask me anything asinine Potter, let me tell you, you do not have the predisposition for dark magic. It is not within you." Snape said seriously

For a long time Harry stared at the fire. He felt tainted again. "How do you know?" Harry asked quietly.

"I have seen your mind Potter. There is not a trace of dark magic inside your mind." Snape's eyes narrowed when Harry glanced at him then back to the fire.

"I know it." Harry finally said then repeated. I know it."

"You know what Potter?" Snape tried to sound indifferent but failed.

"I know dark magic. " Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses. "When Vol...sorry. When You-Know-Who possessed me, some how I learned it from him." Swallowing hard Harry looked over at Snape. An astonished expression was on the pale face.

"What do you mean Potter?" Snape asked. Harry told him briefly about the spider he had put under the imperial curse in the hospital wing.

"And what does the headmaster have to say about this new talent of yours?" Snape stared hard at Harry.

"I never had the chance to tell him." Harry said. "I don't think he'll be thrilled." He added thoughtfully

"That Potter, is an understatement." Snape snorted. "However I do advise telling him. The headmaster may have some useful suggestions."

"Now that, is the understatement." Harry smirked and heard Snape snort again. Now Harry was sure. He had made Snape laugh or as much of a laugh as he would ever get from Snape. To cover his smile Harry yawned and stretched. "One more try before getting some sleep." He said then switched to parseltongue as he watched a shadow of a tree branch dance among the flames of the fire.

While he unrolled his sleeping bag in the tent, which was a regular tent not magically enhanced inside, Harry kept up a steady hiss. Even after he had sat down on the bedroll and had taken off his t-shirt to rub his arms and chest with the insect repellent he had found in the pack, Harry continued his request to speak to any snake, serpent or any creature that understood him.

Snape entered the tent and unfurled his sleeping bag. He frowned at it, took out his wand and gave it a jab. The bag swelled as if inflating. When Snape was satisfied, he climbed on to the cushy bedding and stretched out gazing at Harry who was still rubbing insecticide on his skin and speaking to invisible snakes. "If you wish I could..." He pointed his wand at Harry's sleeping bag.

The offer shocked Harry but he managed a nod and to choke out thanks as the bag inflated. After putting the insect repellent back in the pack Harry lay down on the air cushioned sleeping bag. He had left his shirt off and a light but hot breeze blew across his chest. The light from Snape's wand went out with a word. Closing his eyes Harry took a couple of deep breaths. He was very tired.

The whispering bothered him. Harry didn't remember dreaming but the whispers he heard while he slept annoyed him because he couldn't quite hear what they were saying. There was a whiny whisper to his right and a deeper throaty one on his left but so many in between he couldn't make out the words. Trying to cover his ears Harry groped for his pillow but only found something long and cool to pull over his head.

"Potter." Snape's voice joined the whispering. Not him in my dreams again, Harry groaned and turned over keeping his eyes shut against the noise. "Potter." The voice calling his name was louder now. "POTTER."

"I'm up." Harry lied. He just wanted the dream to stop.

"Harry!" Snape said sharply.

Snape calling him by his first name? Harry's mind really woke this time. After removing the cool length from his head Harry opened his eyes and froze. On the side of the tent was the unmistakable shadow of a huge cobra, hood expanded, poised ready to strike. A loud gasp escaped him and for a brief second Harry almost jumped up to run out of the tent.

"Don't make any sudden movements Potter." Snape said quietly. "It is best not to provoke them."

Slowly moving his head only, Harry gazed upon a mass of snakes slithering around every flat surface in the tent, including over Snape's and Harry's bodies. A large python, Harry had used to cover his head

gazed benignly at him. The cobra, though not nearly as large as the shadow indicated, sat coiled on Snape's chest, swaying slightly back and forth staring at the large hooked nose in front of it.

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Author's notes: Thanks for the reviews!

Why does it take me so long to write a chapter? Let me see...I have to write what happens, then make it interesting for people to read, then I have to eat, sleep, shower now and then, go to work, clean the house, do laundry...the list goes on and on. And with Christmas getting closer things will be getting a bit crazy. This is what happens when I write hastily, a cliffhanger. :o)

The mistake isn't:

Harry asking for dance lessons. He has been to only one dance. The Yule ball in his fourth year.

About the Grangers, Wormtail and Headquarters

Neville's birthday. I found out after I had written that his was the 30th but being so close I didn't think it was so ill-conceived that their parents would celebrate together.

No godmother. Again I found this out after I had written one in but Alice Longbottom is hardly a 'real godmother' being how she's mentally gone, so that isn't it.

Harry's patronus is a stag not his animagus form.

If Hermione's parents take a magical port key into the castle I pretty sure they could see it.

Mark Evens being at Hogwarts, I guess I should have read more of JK's interviews. But that isn't the mistake I'm talking about.

It isn't that Dumbledore didn't go to Hogwarts the same time as McGonagall. The age thing was in an interview too.

The video they watched at Christmas, video cameras were around in 1981 and being wizards of course they could get it to play on today's VCRs even if it wasn't the same format.

Neville's Gran did send him a howler in fact we know of at least two. Before Ron opened his Neville said he had gotten one once and waited and it was horrible. And in PoA when Neville left the list of passwords lying around his gran sent another howler.

Did I write that Fudge sent Sirius to Azkaban? I re-read things (scanned it) and couldn't find where I had written this. If I did that is a mistake but not the one I found. LOL But I'll say you are warm to feeling a bit sweaty about the information coming from the third book.

Mad-Eye is a retired Auror, He is isn't he? Hummm, uhhh.... he came out of retirement to guard Harry for a while. So that's not it.

Mistake clue for this chapter: It can only happen at night.

Clues from other chapters:

It occurs before Chapter 40

It occurs after Chapter 25.

The information can be found in one of the first three books, not in an interview

It involves someone who has been to number twelve Grimmauld Place

Chapter 52

"Wait, don't bite him!" Harry cried, slowly sitting up. He stretched out a restrained hand fearing if he moved too close the cobra would strike Snape.

"He speaks!" And "It's true, it's really true!" repeated in a hiss rippling around the tent like a balloon let loose.

"Man! Talk to me!" The whiny voice pleaded.

"No, speak to me!" Protested several voices.

"Please be quiet." Harry's heart pounded as the cobra bobbed forward a little, as if gauging the distance.

"Potter." Snape whispered his chest moving up and down slightly, catching when the snake moved.

"I'm working on it." Harry muttered in English then in parseltongue. "You, cobra, listen to me please."

"SShhh." The cobra hissed. "You will scare the rat."

"What rat?" Harry frowned then his eyes popped open and he laughed. "That's not a rat."

"Yes, it is a large white rat. I am hungry." The cobra bobbed forward again.

"NO!" Harry carefully moved toward Snape and the snake. "Please don't. It is not a rat."

"I know a rat when I see one." The cobra hissed. "I smell a dead one down its lair."

"What?" Harry stared at Snape for a moment to try to figure out what the snake meant. Snape's mouth was slightly open and it took all Harry's restraint not to burst out laughing. "Listen to me. You are sitting on a man. Feel the movement?"

"A bit." The cobra shifted its coils closer to his quarry. Snape's wand could be seen sticking out of his robes practically under the snake.

"That's him breathing. You are looking at his nose." Harry said. He dreaded the moment he had to tell Snape what the snake thought was a rat.

"You are wasting your time," said a low rumbling hiss. "Omni has just shed his skin and his sight is still dim."

"Great." Harry muttered then asked the cobra . "How can I prove to you that is a nose of a man?"

The hood of the cobra puffed a bit and it let out a long hiss. "Touch it. I will be ready to bite if it darts down its hole."

Touch Snape's nose? Harry closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. "Alright." Why did these things always happen to him? "Hold still Professor." He said as he moved closer. "Now don't bite me by mistake." He told the cobra.

"What are you doing Potter?" Snape eyed him as Harry bent over him.

"You are just going to have to trust me Professor." Harry wiped his hand on his jeans then reached out and pressed the tip of Snape's nose. The cobra jerked forward but only tapped Snape with its blunt nose.

"No rat." The snake hissed very disappointed.

"No, but maybe we can find you something to eat, later." Harry said. "Uh, could you move off him? You're making him a bit nervous." The cobra slithered to the floor of the tent. Snape let out a deep breath.

"It's about time." Snape cautiously sat up. "I won't even ask what that was about Potter." Snape eyed Harry who avoided meeting his gaze by looking around at all the different snakes. Not one runespoor, Harry thought.

“Uh right. Let me ask about the runespoor.” Harry said to Snape then turned to the large python. “Thanks for coming to see me, all of you. This is quite a surprise.”

“We are surprised a human can speak properly.” The python rumbled.

“Yes, have you seen Tilka?” The whiny voice asked. “Last moon a man put her in a sack and I haven’t seen her since.”

“No I haven’t seen your friend.” Harry said. “Sorry that happened. I wanted to ask all of you something.”

“What?” A squeaky voice asked near his ear causing Harry to jump back then quickly shuffle his feet so he wouldn’t step on another snake. A tiny green snake dangled from the tent pole.

“I wonder if any of you have seen or know where a very large runespoor might be living?” Harry asked. He had barely got the word runespoor out and a great whoosh was heard as the snakes rushed to leave the tent. “Wait! Come back!”

The snake stampede continued. The smaller snakes zipped out of sight in an instant. Harry barely saw the tail of the python before it disappeared out the tent flap. Seeing what was happening, Snape grabbed at a tail before it could leave.

The cobra whipped around and snapped at him. Inches from Snape’s nose Harry caught the head above the hood and held tight. “Stop!”

“Let go of me!” The cobra hissed. “Let go!”

“I’ll let you go when you tell me about the runespoor.” Harry told it then grabbed it in both hands as it writhed and whipped its body around trying to get away. Snape joined in to help hold the cobra still. “You can’t get away so tell me.”

“I don’t know!” The cobra hissed then plaintively whimpered. “I’m hungry.”

"Tell me about the runespoor and my friend here will find something to eat for you." Harry knew he was crazy; he had just called Snape his friend.

"I don't know. Let me go." The cobra had gone limp and to Harry it sounded as if the snake was crying.

"Are you afraid of runespoors?" Harry asked.

"No! Yes!" The cobra said then in a hiss so low Harry could barely make out it added. "The great one, one does not speak of its comings and goings."

"But she's my friend. I came here to find her." Harry said. "Please just give me some idea. Are we near where she might be?"

"Sssshhh." The cobra struggled again. "Do not ask me. I can not tell you."

Snape had his wand in his hand now and pointed it at the cobra.

"No." Harry said, struggling to keep a tight hold on the head. "We need his cooperation."

"What do you suggest?" Snape lowered his wand.

Thinking hard Harry finally said. "Rats, get him some rats to eat. He is hungry."

Snape stared at Harry for a moment then raised his wand and said. "Accio rat." A second later a dusty brown rat flew through tent flap straight to Snape. He immobilized the rat and let it drop to the tent floor.

Harry turned the snake's eyes to see the rat. "See the rat? We can get you lots of rats." He gave Snape a nod and two more rats flew in to join the first. In his hands Harry felt the cobra relax.

"I am so very hungry." The cobra hissed.

"Tell us where you've seen the runespoor and you can have them." Harry told it.

"I have never seen the great one but I have heard..." The cobra spoke in a whispery hiss.

"What have you hear?" Harry encouraged.

"I heard the great one lives in a temple of bones." The answering hiss was barely audible.

"Where?" Out of the corner of his eye Harry saw Snape watching the exchange intently.

"Near the long water." The cobra said. "By the falls, though the water is quiet now."

"Is there anything else you can tell me?" Harry asked.

"No that is all I know." The snake insisted.

Harry looked at Snape and gave a nod. "Let's release him outside. Professor, if you could bring the rats?" Snape levitated the rats before him and Harry carried the cobra out to a dried up shrub at the base of a tree. The rats fell to the ground and Harry quickly let go of the cobra. It gave a loud hiss and bit into the closest rat.

"Well Potter?" Snape stared at him.

"He said we would find the great one near the long water, which is probably the Nakambe River, west of here." Harry said.

"Indeed Potter. So you did some homework before coming here." Snape gazed at him with a lot less contempt than usual. "At least it gives us a direction. Get the pack out of the tent. We should set off at once." In five minutes Snape had set a fast pace toward the Nakambe River. Harry silently thanked Hermione for briefing him on the geography of the area.

The first rays of the sun, which had once cast the cobra shadow on the side of the tent, became a blast of heat. Sweat seeping from every pore, Harry concentrated in putting one foot in front of the other. He didn't have to ask why they were hurrying. With only one day to search the dried up river his hope of finding the runespoor was dwindling.

By mid morning they had found an animal trail which obviously led toward water. For sometime they followed the tracks of many different beasts but Harry felt a growing unease. He kept looking behind him, feeling this was all wrong.

"Professor, wait." Harry touched his arm and Snape stopped. "This is wrong. I know it."

"Why is it wrong Potter?" Snape gazed at him with a slightly amused expression.

"It's the wrong direction. I feel it." Harry turned and looked back the way they had come. "We should go that way."

"What direction is the river Potter?" Snape sneered.

"That way." Harry pointed the way they were going. "But." He said confused as he looked behind him again.

"I feel the same need to turn around, Potter." Snape said. "The reserves the ministry has set aside for the runespoor must have misdirection charms on them as well as being unplotable."

"Which makes us feel like we are going the wrong way." Harry finished. "So the stronger the feeling gets the closer we are?"

"To a point." Snape said. "I think once we are actually in the reserve the feeling should fade."

"Let's go on then." Harry said.

"You do not want to rest or eat something." Snape eyed him.

“When we get to the river. Time isn’t on our side.” Harry gazed back at him.

“Good.” Snape said shortly and started walking again, his longer legs making Harry take quicker steps. “You better drink water as we walk. You can easily become dehydrated.”

“Right.” Harry reached to his belt for his water flask and drank his fill as he followed Snape. The land began to change slightly with more bushes and trees. Not enough for Harry to call it a forest by England’s standards but probably a forest in this country. The trail narrowed through thicker brambles which snagged on to Snape’s robes and scratched Harry’s arms. The potion master refrained from using magic to break through the undergrowth. Dumbledore had cautioned Snape not to disturb the fragile ecological balance with unnecessary alteration of the environment.

The thicket ended suddenly and Harry and Snape found themselves at the edge of a roughly plowed field. Two small huts sat in the middle of wilted rows of plants that gave little hint to what crop it might be. A woman and two small boys hoed at the cement hard dirt. The taller boy spotted them and pointed. There was fear on the woman’s face when she straightened up and turned.

“We won’t hurt you.” Snape called in French. “We are looking for snakes.”

Caution replaced the scared look and the woman motioned them closer. As they stepped carefully over the stunted rows, Harry heard Snape mutter something and saw the plants glow green briefly. He caught Snape’s eyes for a brief second but the potion master quickly looked away.

“Do you speak French?” Snape asked. “It is the national language here.”

“No I don’t.” Harry said smiling at the boys standing bravely at the woman’s side.

"I'll do the talking this time then." Snape quipped then turned to the woman. What ever the pale man said made her clap her hands to her face then she started talking quickly and grabbed Snape for a hug. Harry's jaw dropped open and he quickly schooled the smile off his face as Snape tried to free himself from her grasp. She released him and put a hand on each cheek drawing him forward to kiss his face several times. Now it was Harry's turn to look appalled. When she finally let go of Snape's face she gave Harry a huge smile then grasped Snape's hand and pulled him to the hut motioning for Harry to follow.

"Professor what was that all about?" Harry asked as they entered the dirt floored hut.

"I do not know." Snape pulled at his robes to straighten what dignity he had left. "She switched to her local language." Then Snape spoke in French to the woman. This time what the woman said startled Snape and shook his head in obvious denial.

The woman continued in French then pointed to Harry's face. "Yeux verts."

Snape's face went paler then Harry heard an unmistakable reference to a mother.

"I do not understand how this could be." Snape muttered looking around the hut and frowning.

"What?" Harry asked feeling uncomfortable at the beaming smile the woman now gave him.

"She says..." Snape's scowl deepened. "She says I was here years ago, when she was but a girl. I told her I would return one day."

"You were here with my mother?" Harry added.

"You understood what she said about the woman with green eyes?" Snape turned to him.

"No but I heard her mention a mother." Harry explained then asked. "How is it you don't remember being here?"

"I do not know." Snape scowled again. "Unless a very strong memory charm was used on me. But to erase a memory that completely is very difficult. I do not even have the slightest feeling of being here before."

"My mom was good in charms. Lupin said the best in your year." Harry pointed out.

"Yes." Snape drawled considering. He shook his head in disbelief.

"I assume you and my mom came here to find the runespoor?" Harry questioned. "Do they know where she is?"

"No. I can not ask them about a runespoor Potter." Snape said crossly then turned back to the woman and spoke to her. Again when the woman answered, Snape looked startled. Harry saw him take measured breaths to keep control of his temper. The man clenched his jaw as looked at Harry.

"She knows we are searching for a snake." Snape said slowly. He opened his mouth to say more but let out a breath of exasperation. "This is impossible." Snape spat, obviously wanting to shout at somebody. "She said I left a message for myself for when I returned."

"What's the message?" Harry asked eagerly despite Snape's growing anger.

"The path is marked. And to look behind." Snape glared at Harry's enthusiasm. "This is not some cheap mystery novel for us to solve, Potter."

"But don't you see." Harry stared back at him. "This means we are on the right track." Snape blinked.

"I suppose." The man gave a barely perceptible nod then Snape seemed a little embarrassed. "I just do not like not remembering."

"No one would." Harry said. "We should get going. We don't have much time." He glanced at the two boys and the woman, her smile was gone but she still looked willing to help. "Does she know what path you took when you left here?"

Snape spoke with her for a moment and a puzzled look crossed his face this time. "No but she knows from what direction I arrived here."

"So that would mean." Harry thought aloud.

"That your mother and I already had found the runespoor when we arrived here." Snape finished, reluctantly agreeing he had been here once before. "We should eat before we start off. There is enough to share with them."

Harry picked up the pack from the floor and considered. "They can have all of it. We can eat back at Hogwarts." Harry opened the pack, pulled the food out and put it on the small wooden table. Then he added. "Let them have what ever is in the pack that isn't magical. We won't need the tent because we're going back tonight. Then I don't have to carry it."

"Excellent idea Potter." Snape nodded his approval. He took out several small bottles from the pack and put them in his robes pockets. The potions master's praise stunned Harry to silence and he automatically took the sandwich when the woman pushed into his hand and Snape's as they moved to the door. Snape picked up a wooden bucket from the floor next to the door and poured water from his flask into it. The two boys clapped as the bucket overflowed.

"Good-bye." Snape gave a slight nod to the woman. Harry smiled at her, gave a small wave as she pointed to the trees. Quickly they followed another animal trail. Harry gratefully ate the sandwich the woman had insisted he take while he walked as did Snape.

Neither spoke but only concentrated on hurrying to the river. The sun, directly over head now, speckled the ground through the leaves of the few trees in the area. For a time, the land rose slightly then seemed to tilt in the opposite direction. Harry could see the tell-tail signs of

past flooding. A water mark could be seen on the trunk of every tree they passed.

"There Potter." Snape pointed as they came to peer down at a muddy trickle. "The river." He said then looked down the long length in both directions. "Which way is it to the falls?"

Harry didn't know. He gazed up river and down. The wrong choice would mean not finding the runespoor. "The path is marked." Harry said suddenly. "Look around maybe you left a sign or something."

The strange look of approval crossed Snape's face again. Harry didn't know if he could get used to Snape liking his ideas. They hunted along the path in both directions for a short time.

"Here." Snape called and Harry hurried over. The potion master had knelt down near a tree trunk but pointed to a rock. A simple arrow pointing north was scratched into its surface. "Let us hope the stone has not been turned." Snape said and led the way up stream.

The path sloped downward, running along the line of the river. Harry could almost see the mud crisping into clay as the sun baked down on the river bed. He knew how it felt and wished he had a hat or something to shade his head from intense heat.

For almost an hour the pair followed the meandering river. They crossed several small waterless courses which joined the main stream. Bones of dead animals littered the banks. "What spell did you put on their plants?" Harry asked, staring at the carcass of an antelope as they passed. Vultures hopped around the remains.

"A growth and strengthening charm." Snape said quietly. "Hopefully it will keep the crop alive until the rains come."

"And I thought I had it bad." Harry muttered, glancing at the searing sun, now descending to the west.

"It is a sad fact no matter how horrible something is; there is always something worse." Snape commented.

"I don't even want to think what could be worse the Volde...sorry You-Know-Who." Harry grimaced.

"Nor do I." Snape said firmly then pointed. "There Potter. Does that look like a waterfall to you?" Their sudden appearance frightened off several zebras and many gazelles from a muddy pool.

A jumble of rocks had three separate tiers which looked like steps, only rising as high as the top of Harry's head. "I don't know. It could be." Harry looked at the pool of muddy water at the base of the rocks. "If the water isn't running over the falls, there must be an underground stream."

"I will search up here." Snape climbed up the bank and walked across the first level. He stooped and examined the area. "I see no marks. Perhaps you should make your call for assistance."

Harry called to the snakes then paused to listen. He was about to shake his head up at Snape when he heard a little voice from between two rocks.

"What do you want?"

"I just want to talk to you. I need some help finding something." Harry avoided saying a runespoor. To his surprise a small vivid orange head peeked out from the crack. It darted back in when Harry stepped towards it.

"Wait. I won't come closer. Look I'll sit down over here." Harry folded his legs and sat down. "Please I don't want to hurt you." The small head appeared and a second nose poked out beside it.

"What are you seeking?" The first head asked.

"A runespoor. A friend of mine. I heard she lives around the waterfall." Harry saw the second head flick its tongue out.

"We have not heard of one here. But we are young. Perhaps Sigmund could tell you." The first head slithered out further to look up at Snape. The third head or the place where the third head would

have been was now visible. The poison head of the small runespoor was gone, a lifeless stump. "He should find Sigmund soon."

What the runespoor had said finally registered to Harry, who had been staring at the gnawed off end of the runespoor neck. "Professor, don't move." He looked up to see Snape freeze. "Is this Sigmund poisonous?"

"Oh yes. Black spitting cobras generally are. We don't like poison people." The first head gazed at the third neck. We didn't like Pax bragging about his poison all the time. So we got rid of him."

"Uh, right." Harry saw Snape glaring at him for an explanation. "I'm going to see if this Sigmund can help us. Thanks for your help."

"You are quite welcome. I hope you find your friend." The two heads withdrew into the crack leaving the lifeless neck of the third sticking out.

"Be careful Professor. There is another cobra up here somewhere." Harry said as he climbed up beside Snape.

"Is that what the runespoor told you?" Snape glanced around warily.

"Yes. Sigmund is its name." Harry said then called to the snake. "Sigmund, can I talk to you?"

"What do you want?" Answered a deep hiss, a few feet in front of Snape along the stone of the next level. Harry grabbed Snape's arm to keep him from going closer and pointed to the black head of a large snake. The head slowly rose and the hood expanded to reveal a totally black cobra with a silky matt finish to its scaled skin.

"We're looking for a runespoor." Harry refrained from saying large as he stepped carefully to stand beside Snape. The rocks weren't slippery from water but the rounded surface made the footing uneven.

"Why does he not remember." The snake rose, flicking its tongue then said angrily. "He did not need my help the last time. Very rude he was."

Harry looked at Snape exasperated. "You can't even be civil to a snake. He said you were rude to him the last time you were here."

"Get on with it." Snape growled, waving a hand at the snake.

"I see he is the same with you." The snake almost laughed. "I can not tell you where the runespoor dwells, although it is nearby." The cobra lowered its hood and eased down to the stones.

"We don't have much time." Harry pleaded. "Please can't you help us find her?"

"He knows." The snake started slithering down to the lower bank. "Listen to him."

"Come back.' Harry called but the snake disappeared into a clump of dried bushes near the muddy pool. "Great. He says you know, that I should listen to you."

Snape stared at where the snake had been. "Look behind." He glanced at the Harry then back at the large round stones piled haphazardly. "The only things to look behind are the snake or the waterfall, which in this case is the same place."

They both moved closer to the rocks of the next level. Snape had pulled out his wand and started tapping a couple of the smaller stones. Suddenly a rumbling vibrated through their feet. The next instant Harry saw Snape disappear down a hole that had opened beneath his feet. Then he felt the stone below him vanish.

Harry landed softly on his feet beside Snape who was clutching his left ankle. "Is it broken?" He asked as he bent down beside the potion master.

"No Potter." Snape sneered through gritted teeth. "My bones always stick out through my skin." The man felt around on the ground for his wand.

Harry looked up at the opening. To his surprise he had dropped at least twenty meters without injury. Then Harry glanced at his magical boots, perhaps they made landings easier too. As he gazed back up, the holes snapped shut plunging them into total darkness.

An angry snarl came from Snape. "My wand is broken."

Harry felt for his wand in a hidden sleeve on his right boot. "Lumos." The wand tip lit and he held it out for Snape. "Try mine."

Snape gazed at him for a long moment then gingerly took the wand. He gazed at it a moment then commented. "A very powerful wand Potter." He flinched as he moved his broken leg a little then he conjured a splint and secured his leg to it. When Harry looked at him questioningly Snape sighed. "I would rather Madam Pomfrey see to repairing the bones. It is a difficult charm. I would not attempt it with someone else's wand. I will need your assistance to keep moving." Snape held out an arm and Harry pulled him to his feet putting an arm around the thin framed man's waist to help steady him.

"Can you go on?" Harry didn't relish the thought of physical contact with Snape but if he had to he would.

"We have only a few hours left Potter. I can manage for that long." Snape breathed heavily from the effort of standing then held the lit wand up. "How did you?" He gauged the distance they had both fallen then he stared at Harry's boots. "Ah, I wondered why I heard no steps behind me."

"They were a birthday present from some of the order's members." Harry told him looking around. "Which way?" They were in a cavern of smooth stone walls on three sides. In front of them were three ornate arches of black granite with passages that ran off into darkness.

"Let us move closer. Perhaps I left a mark on the correct way." Snape said. He gritted his teeth as he leaned on Harry to hobble over to the openings.

"Why don't you take a pain killer?" Harry asked as Snape panted from the exertion.

"When I feel I need for pain relief, I will take it Potter." Snape said curtly. Then he gazed at all three arches ignoring Harry even though he still used him as a crutch. Harry started to speak but Snape hushed him. "Quiet. I'm considering where would I put a mark if I wanted myself to find it?"

Snape gazed high then back to the ground, contemplating each arch carefully. "I would not put a mark up high. It would be difficult to see." He said with a shake of his head. "Wand height would be the most logical. Any mark lower would be subject to alteration from environment."

"Above any water marks too." Harry said.

"Yes." Snape agreed. "I'll search this one." He pointed to the right hand tunnel. "I would know any mark I have made." Harry helped him over to the opening and kept a steadying hand on the man while he examined the surface of the black granite. "You might try calling for the runespoor. The sound should travel far in these corridors." Snape suggested using Harry's wand to light the stone.

"I just hope we don't get a whole herd of snakes again." Harry said then he thought of Hapa, Giza and Kesho and called down each tunnel for the runespoor.

"There is nothing here." Snape said. "Let me try the middle one." He leaned on Harry and groaned as he hopped over to the center opening. He paused to take a bottle out of his robe and took a couple of sips from it. "This will dull the pain." Snape returned the bottle to his robes and proceeded to check out the entry to the middle passageway.

"There is a mark here." Snape said slowly. "But I did not make this one."

"How do you know?" Harry leaned in closer to look at where Snape pointed.

"A double S is Salazar Slytherin's mark. I use the moon runes which look similar to a narrow capitalized N." Snape gazed into the blackness of the corridor. The wand's small light reflected a short way off highly polished black walls.

"Salazar Slytherin was here?" Harry said a bit in awe.

"So it would seem." Snape turned and look sharply at Harry. "Of course, in the book the runespoor was reading, Salazar Slytherin had brought back several artifacts from Burkina Faso."

"The snake speech potion." Harry said excitedly. "She has to be here. Should we go this way?"

"I should look at the third passageway." Snape pointed. "If I had seen this mark and needed to go this way, I would have put my mark beside Salazar Slytherin's." Harry helped Snape move to the last and immediately Snape found his mark. "Exactly where I would have placed it." He said.

"Let's go then." Harry put his arm around Snape to support him. "Are you okay?" He had seen the potion master flinch.

"I am as well as can be expected." Snape avoided meeting Harry's eyes and held the wand light in front of them. "Proceed."

Gripping Snape's arm across his shoulder with one hand and his other around the man's waist Harry gingerly stepped over the threshold of the arch. Like a cascade of water, torches lit one by one down the long passage. Perhaps a once beautiful walkway the highly polished walls and floor were now cracked and crumbling with dried roots of long dead trees splitting the stone. Slowly they made their way down the passage. In several places Harry had to practically lift Snape over larger roots, silently he was glad the potion master wasn't as heavy as his cousin.

A room opened to the right just a short way inside the passage. "Should we check it out?" Harry asked.

"I think we should continue Potter." Snape breathed heavily. He lifted the wand light to shine it into the opening, the room appeared empty.

"What is this place?" Harry asked as he helped Snap hobble forward. "It almost looks like it was a palace once." He nodded toward a rich etching on the wall.

"I do not know." Snape said almost reverently. "Obviously this was once a civilization long before recorded history. No book I have ever read tells of such of place located here."

"Hapa told us several stories of things even Professor Dumbledore never heard before." Harry paused as he came to an intersection. "Which way?"

Snape took his time looking down each way then pointed to the left. "There is my mark." Harry turned Snape and started down the corridor. The farther they walked the less damaged there was to the walls and the hall became wider until it opened up into a large space. One uneven footstep echoed into up to the domed ceiling as Harry helped Snape into the middle of the elaborate mosaic tiled floor.

"Look." Snape touched Harry's arm and pointed to the ceiling.

Harry had been examining the runespoor depicted in the flooring. He gasped. "It looks like the great hall's ceiling." The orange sky gave testimony of the setting sun.

"Perhaps another call, Potter." Snape suggested quietly. Harry gave his call and listened to it echo around him.

"Nothing." Harry said disappointed. "I wish she would show up. We don't have much time." He glanced at the ceiling.

"Potter, could you help me over there." Snape pointed to a small wooden door. As he helped Snape toward it, Harry realized the door reminded him of the wooden door that led to Snape's private lab. He stopped at the door. "Alohomora." Snape tapped the door with the wand in his hand and the door swung open with an eerie creak.

A torch flared and it was Snape's turn to gasp. Along the wall of the small room was vial after vial of potions. Above each potion container hung a dusty roll of parchment. Harry helped Snape into the room. To Harry's surprise Snape didn't immediately grab a roll to read but studied the actual potions instead. He felt the man move a hand as if to take the parchment over a blue solution but Snape restrained himself with a sigh.

"We do not have time to linger here any longer." Snape said reluctantly.

"It wouldn't hurt to look at one would it?" Harry offered then reached out his hand and took the parchment before Snape could stop him.

The door to the chamber slammed shut. Snape swore. "Great Potter." He raised the wand and tapped it again. "Alohomora." Nothing happened. Snape tried other opening spells but the door remained stubbornly shut.

"Now what." Harry said guiltily looking at the offending parchment in his hand.

"Well Potter. Our little quest has come to a slightly early end." Snape held the wand up to shed more light around them. "There is no way out other than the port key."

"We can't give up yet." Harry said without much hope. He knew as well as Snape if they couldn't get out of this room finding the runespoor was impossible. "Sit down here." Harry indicated a crate next to the shelving and eased Snape on to it. "I'll look around."

"For what Potter." Snape asked clutching his leg. He fumbled in his robes pocket for the vial of pain killer and took three sips from it.

"I don't know. Maybe a way out. Maybe you just can't go out the same way you came in." Harry searched along the wall, running his hand on the rough cut stone.

"Perhaps." Snape drawled. He shifted on the crate to watch Harry examine the room.

"This room seems older than the corridors and room on the other side of the door." Harry commented. "Here you might as well look at this while I look." He handed Snape the roll of parchment he had taken.

The potion master unrolled the scroll and held the wand close to the parchment. Snape leaned back against the wall and gave a groan as he shifted his leg. The next thing Harry heard was a harsh cry as Snape fell backwards down a narrow stone slide. Harry dove at him and managed to grab his robes but was pulled into the tunnel with Snape.

The slide twisted and spiraled downward but had not been spared the ravages of time. Snape hit a large gap and his decent paused for only a moment before Harry slammed into him, pushing both of them past the separated stone. With every turn of the tunnel they picked up speed.

"Is it getting hotter in here?" Harry shouted to Snape as they continued to accelerate.

"Yes," Snape snapped then groaned Harry bumped into him on a turn.

Harry managed to sit up a little to check out the path of the tunnel as he sped along. A red glow came from another crevasse. That can't be good he thought. "Grab on to anything you can." Harry yelled trying to dig his fingers and heels into the smooth stone. He felt his boots grab hold but then Snape knocked into him and they kept sliding. Harry scrambled to use his feet as a break again and had managed to slow their decent but the slide came to an end. As if in slow motion, Harry and Snape poured over the edge of the broken stone. Both caught hold with their fingers and stopped their fall. Dangling by the tips of their fingers, the sight below them made Harry gasp. The roll of parchment landed on a pool of molten lava and burst into flames.

"Use your port key Potter." Snape gasped.

"How will you get away?" Harry panted.

"I can apparate back to Hogsmeade." Snape said sweat dripping down his face from the effort of holding on. "GO!"

"You go first. So I know you can get out." Harry insisted.

Snape stared at him as if Harry had lost his mind. "Fine Potter. Not more than one second after I leave." He warned then his eyes seemed to focus on something far away. When their eyes met again Harry knew Snape couldn't leave.

"We can both use the port key." Harry said breathing hard. "Shift over this way."

"This is not the time to be a Gryffindor Potter." Snape snarled back. "Use the damn key."

"Only if you put your hand on mine and we can both leave." Harry wheezed. The pool sent a belch of sulfur up to them.

"I will fall if I move. I do not want to provide you with an entertaining story of how you saw me burned in hell." Snape met his eyes, a resigned acceptance reflected back to Harry.

"I don't want you to die." Harry said quietly not blinking as another foul draft came from below. "Just try."

Snape looked away, down between his arms, taking shallow breaths. "I can't Potter. I haven't the strength to move."

"Then I'll move to you." Harry concentrated on his right hand and slid it closer to Snape's hand.

"You can not risk it Potter." Snape said weakly. "Leave before we both fall."

"Almost there." Harry slid his left hand a few inches then moved his right hand again. Sweat was making his hands feel slippery and he froze. "Just a little more." Harry saw Snape's hand begin to lose hold of the stone and was about to reach out to Snape when something touched his leg and he jumped.

"Ssss Master." Three familiar heads hissed. Harry felt a strong length curling slowly around his body. Instead of putting weight on his arms the runespoor held him firmly in place.

"Hapa, Giza, Kesho! Am I glad to see you." Harry gasped when his hands slipped from the edge of the stone.

"Do not worry Master. I have thee." Hapa hissed in his ear.

"Get Snape! Hurry, he can't hold on much longer." Harry said, bobbing in the air surrounded by orange coils.

"I have him." Hapa said and somehow Snape was conveyed into the same coils which held Harry. "We must get thee away from here. Not a place for Master to be."

"Wait." Harry felt Snape's nose being crushed against his cheek. "Not so tight."

The runespoor didn't answer but slowly, wrapped in their orange cocoon Harry and Snape were lowered toward the heat of the lava. Then Harry saw below them where the serpent had anchored her tail end. A black granite arch, broken by the earth's movement provided a strong pillar for the runespoor to wrap her length around. Steadily they were drawn into the passage and away from the heat of the molten rock.

"You can let go of us now." Harry heard Snape's muffled complaint.

"You came! I said you would." Kesho bumped Harry's face with her nose. "You love us." Hapa and Giza added their welcomes to Kesho's.

"Right. Can you let me go now?" Harry asked again hoping Snape's nose wasn't making a permanent indentation into his cheek. "Be careful of Snape. His leg is broken." He felt the coils relax slowly so Harry was able to catch a hold of Snape when the support of the runespoor was released. The pale man looked very green. He started fumbling in at his robes for the vial of pain killer. "I'll get it." Harry quickly found the bottle and Snape took three sips.

"Thanks Potter." Snape said curtly. He with drew Harry's wand from his robes said hoarsely. "Lumos."

"My wand!" Harry said in relief. "I thought it was gone for good."

"I had the foresight to slip it into my robes as we slid down the tunnel." Snape said still looking a bit green. "I do not understand why I could not apparate."

"Magic will not work so near to the earth's blood." Kesho said. She still had her head on Harry's shoulder and he would swear she was grinning.

"Can you show us the way out?" Harry asked, stroking Kesho. "Where is the shield?"

"Follow us Master." Hapa said and moved down the tunnel. Once again Harry helped Snape along. One glance and Harry could tell the man was reaching the end of his endurance.

"Will the port key activate at a set time Professor?" Harry asked.

"Yes." Snape said weakly. "One hour past sundown."

Harry passed on Kesho's information about magic to Snape as they followed the runespoor. "Actually, I have heard or read something about that theory, many years ago." The potion master tensed as Harry lifted him over a large crack in the floor.

"Hapa is it much father?" Harry asked anxiously. "Snape can't go much further."

"Not far Master. A few more lengths, that is all." Hapa soothed. The tunnel met with a corridor similar to the one they had first traveled.

"Hapa what is this place? Who built it?" Harry asked.

"My first master lived here and his father before him. I do not know who shaped the stone." Hapa paused, staring at something in the past.

"Many hands tapped at this rock, my heart tells me." Kesho said.

"How did you end up back here?" Harry questioned as Hapa continued.

"Our first master was very wise or perhaps became wiser." Hapa snorted but continued in a sad voice. "He lost us once. He had dropped the shield and was injured by a false step." Harry heard her sigh. "Another picked up the shield who knew our speech so we were bound to follow. I will not tell you of the bloody battles which followed nor of the treachery of the phoenixes." Anger rose in her voice. "But he finally found us and we were his again." The sadness returned when Hapa said. "Grievously injured he was." She paused in her tale and stopped moving. Harry could see her swallow several times. "We held him in our coils as life ebbed from his limbs. In his last breath and strength he gave us the right to choose to return home if the shield is dropped." Hapa said no more and started moving again.

Quietly Harry relayed the story to Snape. "Interesting Potter." Snape said equally softly. "Once we are safely back at Hogwarts perhaps she can elaborate on that tale."

"Here Master." Hapa said. "The shield resides here." The runespoor had stopped in front of the very wooden door from which they had nearly plunged to their death.

"Are you sure?" Harry said. "I couldn't take going down that slide again."

"Trust me master." Hapa tapped the door and it opened but instead of being filled with potions, the torch, which had lit with the opening of the door, shimmered off shield after brilliantly polished shield on the wall. All except one, a dark space held the runespoor shield, the only one made of wood.

"I will lean against the wall out here while you retrieve the shield, Potter." Snape said firmly pointing to a place next to the door.

"You must come too." Hapa wrapped her coils around him once again. "I will keep you safe. The way in is not the way out."

"Trust her Professor." Harry stepped into the room followed by the runespoor carrying Snape in her strong loops; he didn't have the strength to protest. "She says the way in isn't the way out."

"Great." Snape muttered. "Just get the shield so we can leave this place."

Gingerly Harry reached for the runespoor shield. The wooden serpent heads flicked their tongues and their eyes glowed red at his touch. "Got it." Harry gripped the worn leather straps firmly with his left arm as he dug in his pocket for the port key. "Do you think this port key will work here?" He asked Hapa then regretted it as all three heads hissed angrily at him.

"Wicked Master!" Hapa spat. "We do not like traveling in the wind."

"But there's no other way for me to get back to Hogwarts." Harry's heart started pounding with fear. "I don't want to leave you here. What if Voldemort finds you?"

"SSSS I will not journey by that way again." Giza said firmly.

"Please Giza. Just this once?" Harry saw Snape looking at him concerned. "They don't want to travel by port key again. I told you they don't like it."

Snape sighed, closed his eyes and leaned heavily on the coils which held him. Harry saw the man freeze and his eyes opened to narrow slits. "We will leave with the shield. The runespoor is bound to the shield and will follow on her own accord."

Harry told the runespoor of the plan. For once it seemed like the three heads were stunned with silence for a moment. "Yesss." Hapa finally said. "We will follow the shield."

“Here Professor.” Harry helped Snape out of the thick orange coils to stand next to him so he could touch the port key. “Ready?” With a curt nod from Snape, Harry said. “Moony’s night.” With familiar pull from behind his navel, the room with the shields disappeared in a rush of wind and colors.

Author’s notes: Happy New Year!!! Ah Reviews sweet sweet reviews!!!

Excuse my French! My high school French is too long ago, (oops I’m telling my age here) to attempt any sort of conversation in French. I tried the on-line translators and it just wasn’t working.

We have a winner to the Mistake Contest!!! That last clue about night really gave it away.

Two people actually got it right on the same day but abcdefghi explained it the best:

Abcdefghi Is the mistake Remus transforming in a dungeon, where there are no windows, when in the third book he only began to change when the moon appeared from behind the clouds?

Yes, that is the mistake. I had a solution to this problem at the time but I just forgot to include it.

Things are coming together. I better get busy and finish this before the next book comes out!

What was, what is, what shall be. Pieces of a puzzle, falling into place

Chapter 53

The welcome Harry received from Ginny, Hermione and Ron was almost as good as after he had been in jail for a month. They all seemed relieved and surprise he was all in one piece. Ginny clasped his hand and leaned against him as Harry told them about the journey. Hermione gasped at regular intervals and Ron sat open mouthed but went into hysterical laughter when Harry told him about the cobra thinking Snape's nose was a rat.

The runespoor woke Harry early on Monday morning, insisting she be fed before he went off to classes. After he had went down to Hagrid's and brought back three large rats Harry headed to the great hall for breakfast. When he stepped onto the second floor Harry thought about Snape. Almost automatically Harry walked down to the hospital wing. He didn't know why he wanted to check up on Snape. He still didn't like the man. Even though on their trip to find the runespoor both had called a momentary truce to their mutual hostilities Harry still felt he hated Snape.

"I am fine, Madam." Snape's irritated voice was the first thing Harry heard when he entered the infirmary.

"You're fine when I say you are fine." Madam Pomfrey's voice held the stubborn tone Harry knew so well. "Headmaster, won't you do something?"

"He is a grown man Poppy, albeit a foolish one for not listening to your counsel." Dumbledore's voice sounded slightly amused. Harry cleared his throat as he walked around the screen drawn around Snape's bed. "Ah Harry." Dumbledore motioned him closer.

Snape sat on the side of the bed buttoning his robes over a grey night shirt. The pale man's eyes flashed a glance at Harry but he said nothing. But Harry thought the glance held much less malice than it normally did.

"How are you Professor?" Harry kept his tone neutral.

"As I have told Madam Pomfrey and the Headmaster I am fine and will be returning to my quarters." Snape spoke slowly through his clenched teeth. Harry glanced at Snape's leg. It seemed straight and normal.

"You replaced my bones in my arm in one night and you said repairing bones is easier. Why don't you want him to leave?" Harry asked the nurse.

"An arm does not bear the weight of the body while walking like a leg." Madam Pomfrey explained. "He should not put any weight on his leg for two more days."

"Ridiculous. It is perfectly fine." Snape reached for a wand on his bedside table.

"Professor? Why didn't you fix your leg after I loaned you my wand?" Harry turned to the man getting ready to stand.

"I told you Potter." Snape's temper seeped into his voice. "Madam Pomfrey is much more adept at such spells." He broke off and froze. An odd silence hung in the air. The nurse had her arms folded smugly across her chest. Dumbledore's lips twitched slightly as if he was fighting back a smile.

Snape let out a breath of exasperation. "Fine." He slammed his wand back down on the bedside table and pulled at his robes sending the buttons pinging off in every direction. After throwing his robe on the floor Snape swung his legs back in bed, shoving them under a light sheet. "Do not put the blame on me if the idiots in sixth and seventh year do not pass their finales." He seethed. "And what do you want Potter?"

"I just stopped by to see how you are Professor." Harry said trying not to smile.

"So you have and you can now leave. I endured enough of your company over the weekend." Snape wave his arm at Harry. "Oh and bring the runespoor down this evening and we can continue with the translation." he added.

"I have quidditch practice." Harry said but the mixture of anger and disappointment in Snape's face made him offer. "So I'll have to come afterwards."

"Fine." Snape nodded curtly dismissing Harry again.

"Get some rest Severus." Dumbledore said gently. He laid a hand on Harry's shoulder and walked out of the hospital wing with him. "I want to thank you Harry." Dumbledore said the moment they were out of earshot of Snape. "Although I am sure Professor Snape would have been fine. He could have ended up with a permanent limp had he not stayed in bed."

"Why would he risk something like that when it is preventable?" Harry asked.

"Well, it is a common affliction of solitary people. They tend to believe they can always take care of themselves and do not like being told otherwise." Dumbledore said soberly. The headmaster and Harry walked down to the great hall for breakfast.

As he had promised, Harry brought the runespoor and Salazar Slytherin's book to the hospital wing later that evening. Hapa slithered up onto the hospital bed carefully coiling her length on both sides of Snape's healing leg. The potions master eyed her reproachfully for a long moment then nodded to Harry, who was stifling a yawn.

The runespoor began to read, Harry repeating the words to Snape with a sigh. In the last three days he had spent more time with Snape than with Ron, Hermione and Ginny. At least Snape had quit being so sarcastic, Harry thought as he gazed at the quill racing across the parchment.

When finally Snape held his hand up to stop the recitation, they sat for a long moment without speaking while he caught up. Snape broke the silence. "Draco came to see me today."

"What did he want?" Harry frowned.

"He was quite how I should say, repentant. Malfoy told me you had made him realize the choices he had to make. He wishes to help against the Dark Lord." Snape's voice was calm but Harry thought he could detect a slight sneer to the tone.

"Do you believe him?" Harry held his breath.

"Of course not, Potter. Draco lies worse than you do." Snape snapped. "Be very careful of young Malfoy. He is more dangerous than you want to admit."

"No doubt about that." Harry let out his breath, relieved Snape hadn't believed Malfoy. "So what did you tell him?"

"I told Draco I would pass his request on to the headmaster and any assistance on his part would be welcomed." Snape said silkily.

"Did he believe you?" Harry studied Snape closely; the potion master was in a strange mood.

"Draco believes he is more accomplished at Legilimency than he is." Snape stopped. Harry saw an even stranger look pass across the man's face. Could it have been guilt? Harry wasn't sure. "As I said Potter, he is more dangerous than you think so be on your guard at all times." Snape finished lamely. "You may go." He said abruptly and kept his head bent over the parchment as Harry left.

Harry and the runespoor made their way back up to Gryffindor tower, the runespoor slithering along beside him, like a dog at heel.

"He is ill." The Kesho said.

"What do you mean?" Harry glanced at the serpent sharply as they climbed a rickety wooden staircase.

"His spirit is injured." Kesho answered. "Can you not smell?"

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked very puzzled.

“He hurts inside.” Kesho said. “He has lost himself.”

“Oh, that makes it understandable.” Harry smirked. The last thing he wanted to do was analyze Snape.

“You must see past his hard shell. He bleeds inside.” Kesho insisted.

“But he got over that.” Harry assumed the runespoor was talking about Voldemort’s torture of Snape over Christmas.

“You still do not see.” The runespoor stopped in the corridor which led to the Fat Lady’s portrait. “Did you not listen when he hung by his toes?”

“Fingers.” Hapa corrected. “We heard the dark one. His wish to go into the liquid fire.”

“He didn’t wish any such thing.” Harry said. Now they were talking nonsense.

“But he did.” Kesho maintain. “He would rather burn than continue with no purpose.”

“Strange he did not opt for a quick painless poison.” Giza commented.

Harry turned to gaze at Kesho. “But he teaches.”

“Teaching is not his passion. It is more so his prison, a prison with no bars but no way to escape either.” Kesho hissed.

“It’s his choice either way.” Harry shrugged. “Look I’m tired and the last thing I want to know is how Snape feels.” He started down the hall to the Fat Lady. The runespoor followed and didn’t say another word about Snape.

“Password.” The Fat Lady said.

“Dragon dung.” Harry said and climbed through the portrait hole when she had swung forward. He had only taken two steps when he froze. The only light in the common room was the glowing embers in the fireplace. But it was enough light to show two people too busy on the couch to notice Harry and the runespoor entering the common room. The red light from the fire only accentuated the red head in the midst of a bushy shadow.

“Are they mating?” Kesho whispered in awed.

Choking back a laugh Harry said softly. “No, but be quiet and follow me.” Carefully, Harry stole across the room and silently slipped into the chair opposite the involved pair. At first he was going to sit there until he was noticed but when Ron’s hands began to wander with no sign of Hermione stopping them, Harry thought he better say something.

“I wish I had some popcorn. Not much of plot though.” Harry sat back like he was watching a movie.

“Harry!” The pair broke apart. Hermione’s face was pink and she hastily pulled her robes closed and Ron’s hand reappeared from somewhere under her blouse.

“What do you want?” Ron glared at him not letting go of Hermione completely.

“Just got back from reading for Snape.” Harry said pointing at the runespoor.

“And you didn’t have good enough manners to go on and leave us be?” Ron asked angrily.

“Thought you might be interested in hearing what Snape said about Malfoy.” Harry said unperturbed.

“What did he say Harry?” Hermione kept trying to smooth her hair and robes with Ron’s arm still around her.

After Harry told them about Malfoy he also told them of Snape's strange behavior and what the runespoor had said about the potions master.

"Of course he's not over that yet." Hermione seemed to understand completely. "His confidence must be completely shattered and that takes a long time to heal."

"Who really cares if he wants to do himself in? It would be a big favor for all of us who has to sit classes with him." Ron grinned then clutched the back of his head. "Ouch. Why did you do that?" Kesho had sharply rapped the red head with her blunt nose. Her eyes were flashing and she hissed at him.

"He speaks but does not think." Kesho sizzled then snapped at Ron who drew back in alarm.

"She likes Snape so you better watch it." Harry tried hard not to smile.

"I just don't understand this worry over Snape's feelings." Ron said rubbing the back of his head and keeping an eye on the runespoor. "It's not like he's worried about anyone else's feeling."

"But if he's thought of suicide..." Hermione looked worried. "Ron don't you see? His hostilities go so much deeper than just being annoyed at students."

"I'll ask you the same thing I asked Kesho, Hermione. What are you talking about?" Harry sighed.

Hermione gave a sigh too then began. "If you can forget your own dislike of Snape for just a bit I'll try to explain." She gave Ron a stern look to keep him quiet. "Right. The way I see it is this; Snape obviously comes from a pure blood family deep into the dark arts and possibly Voldemort's supporters from the very beginning." She took another breath. "Think about it, Snape turns from his family beliefs to help Dumbledore." Hermione held up her hand to stop Ron from interrupting. "But he finds out his skill at occlumency not as infallible as he had thought."

"But he can't blame himself for Voldemort finding him out." Harry said.

"Harry," Hermione said emphatically. "What if you suddenly found out you really couldn't fly very well? That all this time someone was putting spells on you and the broom so you could? How would that make you feel?"

"Not great but I wouldn't want to kill myself." Harry said uneasily.

"But being uncovered by Voldemort goes so much deeper than flying a broom Harry." Hermione explained. "He is like Sirius was last year, not able to move about freely since the death eaters are certainly still watching for him. So he's not able to do anything useful for the Order."

"Yeah but he has teaching." Ron said firmly.

"Kesho said teaching is but a prison without bars for him." Harry said thoughtfully.

"If it is, he's made it that way himself." Ron said irritated. "Only the Slytherins like him."

"Which is another thing." Hermione interjected. "Sirius had many people around him to keep his spirits up, especially you Harry. Who does Snape have?" Hermione questioned. "You can't really count his house because many of their parents are Death Eaters. Dumbledore for sure but I expect it's not a close friendship, having more a professor and headmaster relationship. Perhaps Professor McGonagall is his friend but she is much older than him so it would be hard to have a close alliance. The other teachers do treat him with respect but it is different when you need someone to lean on. And being a solitary person I imagine it has been hard for Snape to even admit he needs someone to talk to at all."

All the time Hermione had been speaking Kesho had been hissing into Harry's ear agreeing with her and quite amazed a human understood. "The furry one sees with her heart." Kesho said.

Harry told Hermione what the runespoor had said and she smiled and eyed the head on Harry's shoulder. "Furry one? My name is Hermione, Kesho."

"We do not name humans until they have earned their name." Kesho hissed. "You are close Master but you need to see more." Harry relayed the message to Hermione.

"So the point of all this is?" Ron yawned.

"The point is Ron," Hermione said irritated. "Despite how you feel about Snape, he is a human being and seems to need help." She glared at him when he snorted then sighed. "I just don't know how a person would go about helping him. I've never read anything about wizard psychology." Hermione's eyes gave a quick glance at the wall in the direction of the school library.

"How do you expect to help someone who makes you feel like dung." Ron scowled. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I just don't feel any sympathy toward him." He ducked his head as he saw Kesho move. "Okay I don't want him dead....not really."

Staring at the glowing embers Harry closed his eyes and sighed. Ron couldn't relate to not having anyone, surrounded all his life by family. The trouble was Harry knew exactly how it was to be alone. He understood not having any hope in life. "He does seemed to out of his way to be nasty." Harry finally said.

"Well, Snape had to be hard on us when he was undercover, so maybe old habits are hard to break." Hermione ventured.

"But he doesn't like me just because I look like my dad." Harry commented.

"Maybe you should point that out to him." Hermione suggested. "Remind him you aren't your father."

"And Snape can't figure that out all by himself?" Ron sneered and stood up looking disgusted by the conversation. "I'm going to bed. Goodnight." He kissed Hermione and stood up. His robes were still

open and his shirt unbuttoned, showed a red mark at the base of his neck.

Struggling to contain a laugh Harry called after Ron. "I'll be up in a minute." He turned back to Hermione. "I understand what you are saying Hermione about Snape being alone but he has gone out of his way to be unbearable. And I can't see him accepting help from anyone except maybe Dumbledore."

"And I understand what you are saying about Snape being nasty." Hermione met Harry's eyes for a moment then looked away.

"What?" Harry hadn't like the look she had given him.

"Okay I'm going to say this but it's just an observation, okay?" Hermione waited until Harry gave a cautious nod. "You may be the closest thing Snape has to a friend, Harry."

"What?" Harry choked. "Me? Snape's friend?"

"Look at all the time you have spent with him, Harry." Hermione explained. "He has saved your life and you saved his, a couple of times now." When Harry's mouth just hung open Hermione continued. "You have seen him at his very worst, in the hands of Voldemort. Only Lupin and Dumbledore has seen that side of him."

"So?" Harry's brow furrowed.

"You have also seen him face death, hanging by his fingers in that cave." Hermione said. "Harry when people share certain experiences, they become closer whether they mean to or not. Remember how we became friends?"

Harry thought back to his first year and the mountain troll that had sealed their friendship forever. He smiled fondly at Hermione and nodded. "Yeah, I remember."

"I'm not saying you have to be his best mate but maybe just spending time with him will help." Hermione suggested.

“Help what?” Harry had a horrible sinking feeling that he was going to try to help Snape for some reason his mind hadn’t settled on yet.

“Help him keep connected with other people.” Hermione said firmly. “If he isolates himself, he’s more apt to brood.”

Snape brooding? Harry started to snort but a yawn came out instead. “I think my brain is being overloaded by talk of Snape.” Harry reached out and squeezed Hermione’s hand. “Thanks for trying to explain things. Maybe I’ll have another go at it tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good night Harry. I’m off to bed too.” Hermione clasped Harry’s hand and gave his cheek a kiss after they had stood up. “You understand you just don’t want to admit it.”

“Who would want to admit they understood Snape?” Harry smirked. “See you in the morning.” He watched her disappear up the girls’ stairs then climbed the spiral steps up to his dorm.

When Harry was in bed, settling into his pillow his thoughts unwillingly went to Snape. What had they been talking about when the man had gone stranger than normal? Draco, whether or not Snape was believed... A knot formed in Harry stomach. Snape was supposed to be an occlumency master and yet Voldemort had known he was a spy. Even though Voldemort was the most powerful wizard the dark arts has ever known that excuse wouldn’t placate a damaged self-esteem.

Harry started counting backwards from one-hundred to get his mind off of Snape but the look in the man’s eyes as they hung above the molten rock came back to haunt him. Kesho was right. Snape had wanted to die. It seemed impossible Snape could have feelings beside hate and contempt. The anger Snape showed to him might have once been triggered by Harry’s resemblance to his father but now it was fueled by fear of living. Unbidden from somewhere inside himself, just as he was about to fall asleep, Harry wondered if he tried to help Snape if it would make up what his father had done to him.

The next evening Harry and the runespoor had reached the floor of the hospital wing when he was stopped by Ernie McMillan so he could admire the serpent.

"Harry, wait." Ginny was hurrying down the stairs with Cleo in her arms. Ernie said goodnight and left down to the entrance hall.

"Hi." Harry smiled at Ginny. "What's up?"

"Cleo." Ginny held the cat up a bit. "She wanted me to follow you."

"Oh, I had forgotten she's been trailing Snape." Harry stared at the black and white cat. Still slim and sleek, Cleo had developed fluffy ruff and tail as she had grown into a cat. "I can take her if you want. You don't have to put up with Snape." He offered.

"I'm not afraid of him." Ginny's eyes flashed.

"I didn't say you were." Harry said smiled. "It's just I'm used to his..."

"Rudeness?" Ginny asked. "I thought maybe we could spend a little time together, even if it is with Snape. Unless you don't want my company?" Her voice sounded hurt.

"I do." Harry said hastily. "I would much rather spend time with you. I just don't want you getting your feelings hurt by Snape." He tried to explain but when Ginny grinned at him he realized she had been putting him on.

"You are too easy." Ginny shifted Cleo so she could slip her arm through his. "I don't care what Snape says. I would like to hear what the runespoor says is going through Cleo's mind."

"Don't say I didn't warn you." Harry said and he felt his face going red as Kesho said something about Harry's mate to Hapa and Giza. "We better get moving. Snape gets really rude when I'm late."

A minute later Harry, Ginny, Cleo and the runespoor entered the hospital wing. Snape looked up and halted a reprimand he had begun. "You're late..." He stared at Ginny for a long moment then gave a

quick glance at Harry. "Miss Weasley." He nodded at her, almost politely.

"How are you Professor?" Ginny kept her hold on Cleo who was squirming to jump on Snape's bed with the runespoor.

"Not in good temper for pleasantries." Snape said through clenched teeth. "What are you doing here Miss Weasley?"

"Cleo wanted me to follow Harry." Ginny said still struggling with the cat. "I understand... Cleo, be still." But with one more quick wriggle and Cleo jumped on to the bed and trotted right on to Snape's lap. Ginny hurried to remove her but Snape held up a restraining hand. The man and cat stared at each other for a long time.

"What does she want Potter." Snape slowly drew his eyes away from the cat. "You said the runespoor could speak cat."

"I'll find out." Harry said. He passed the question on to Hapa.

After a couple of minutes Hapa hissed to Harry. "She wants him to remember her when it is time to go."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked.

"I do not know. That is all she will say." Hapa said. "She seems to know him."

"Oh of course she does." Harry blurted out in frustration then turned to Snape. "You sure get around, Professor. Cleo seems to know you. She says she wants you to remember her when it is time to go."

"And what does that mean?" Snape asked the cat still sitting on his lap.

"She won't explain further." Harry said. "I could ask if you were rude to her too." The quip came out of his mouth before Harry could stop it. Snape's black eyes narrowed as they flicked in Harry's direction.

“Be careful Potter.” Snape warned. “You are not in my classes but such familiarity is inappropriate, no matter how much time we spend together.”

“Sorry Professor.” Harry didn’t know why he wanted to laugh.

“So.” Snape turned his eyes back to the cat. “If that is all you have to tell me, you may go.” He waved a hand to shoo the cat off his lap and Cleo batted it repeatedly.

“Cleo, stop it!” Ginny hurriedly tried to remove the cat but Cleo sank her claws into Snape’s night shirt and from the way he flinched, into his chest.

“Miss Weasley, leave her.” Snape grimaced slightly laying his hand on Ginny’s wrist. “I do not wish to have Madam Pomfrey tell me I must remain another night because I have cat scratch fever.”

“Sorry Professor.” Ginny stared at him in concern as she straightened up. “Could I stay while the runespoor reads?”

“Why?” Snape gazed at her reproachfully. “Surely you have studying to do.”

“I do.” Ginny pulled her potions book out of her robes. “I can study here. I just wanted to spend some time with Harry.” Her face went pink then she added. “And I did want to ask you about slow acting venoms.”

“Your brother should be more than willing to answer any questions you have about potions.” Snape went back to staring at the cat.

“Percy is a good teacher.” Ginny said. “Maybe it’s because he’s my brother or something but I think you explained things better.”

Snape’s head jerked up and he eyed Ginny suspiciously. “Has that fool of a headmaster put you up to this?” Anger flashed in his eyes then changed to surprise when Ginny glared back at him.

‘No. I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it Professor.” Ginny said indignantly. “I would hope Professor, if I ever do something for fifteen years that I would be better at it than someone who has been at it only four months.”

With a half opened mouth Harry watched the exchange not knowing what to do. Part of him wanted to jump in and stop Snape from questioning Ginny’s intentions then another part of him, the one with a strange sense of humor, found it quite entertaining.

“Perhaps Miss Weasley.” Snape drawled still eyeing her. “You remind me of your mother’s brother, Fabian.” He commented.

“Mom hardly ever talks about her brothers.” Ginny said soberly. “Did you like him?”

“He was....tolerable.” Snape said carefully. Harry changed a gasp into a cough, there had been a slight twitch on the thin lips. Snape almost smiled! That was a high compliment from a Slytherin about a Gryffindor. “Bring a chair over for Miss Weasley Potter.” Snape ordered abruptly.

When he turned to summon a chair from across the room, Harry allowed himself to smile. Not about Snape’s behavior but in pride over Ginny’s ability to stand up to the man’s brashness.

“Very well, can we get this started Potter?” Snape took quill, ink and parchment from the stand.

“You’re very quiet.” Harry said giving Ginny’s hand a little squeeze as they walked back to Gryffindor tower much later. “Snape didn’t get to you. What’s up?”

“When he touched me.” Ginny said uneasily. “I felt he was in pain. Not physical pain but very deep and....I know it’s nothing I can fix.” She looked up at Harry with a worried look. “I know what Kesho is talking about.”

“Now don’t you start worrying about Snape.” Harry sighed. He was so tired of Snape’s problem.

"I'm glad I came tonight." Ginny said. "He wasn't too bad. And he did seem to appreciate my questions about poisons."

"Appreciate them? He was amazed you could ask a question that made sense." Harry laughed. He didn't know why he felt happy, just having Ginny around made Snape tolerable. "Poor Snape." Harry slipped his arm around her. "Gryffindors trying to help him. He'll really go insane."

Since his trip with Snape, Harry made a point of reading the books in his mother's trunk any time the dormitory was empty. He took special care to make sure the dark arts book were well hidden in both his trunk and his mother's when he was done with them.

As he delved deeper into the books he found spells he remembered the Death Eaters using last year. The curse Antonin Dolohov had used on Hermione had four pages dedicated to it in *Spells to Darkness* by Albert Weasley. Several curses Voldemort himself had used were in *The Power of the Shadow* by Sigeric Snape.

Each time he opened a dark art book Harry had a sinking feeling. The power he felt with each dark spell he silently read made Harry worry if there were counter spells strong enough to defend his side. Then from deep inside himself he would hear a single tone from his phoenix self and that brought images of Dumbledore dueling with Voldemort last year and his hope would return.

Long after all the other boys were asleep and feeling restless with the upcoming quidditch match the next day, Harry slid out of bed and opened his trunk at the foot of his bed. Usually he just put aside his baby album to get to the books but this time Harry paused then tucked it under his arm and grabbed the book entitled; *Dark above Light* by Sigeric Snape .

After making sure the drapes around his bed were closed Harry lit his wand then opened his baby album. He slowly turned each page taking in every little detail of each picture.

After seeing and hearing their voices in the video Harry almost heard them as they moved in the pictures. Turning a page something slid out of the album. He picked it up. A lock of Harry's baby hair tied with a blue ribbon. He had stuck it in the album so it wouldn't get lost. Harry felt the soft baby hair between his fingers feeling a bit melancholy. He went to stick it back between the pages of the album again when the light of his wand illuminated the hair a bit brighter and he froze. Among the jet black hairs were three dark red ones.

His heart started pounding, the snake speech potion! Harry almost jumped out of bed to race off to Snape's quarters but he got a hold of himself. Snape would not be happy to be awoken this early. Carefully he put the lock of hair in the front of the album and went back looking at the pictures, trying to keep his mind off the hairs.

Turning the last page Harry took a quick peek out of his curtain to check the time. No glimmer of dawn lightened the sky. If he tried to wake Snape before the sun was up he'd be in detention his whole last year at Hogwarts. Sighing in frustration Harry leaned back against his headboard to study the last page of photos in the album.

The very last picture showed his mother standing, holding him in her arms. It must have been very close to his first birthday, Harry thought. His attention was on the little boy in his mother's arms as he tried to judge the age of his younger self. When Harry shifted his attention to his mother he was surprised he hadn't noticed her hair was much shorter than it had been in the videos. Idly Harry decided he liked her auburn hair longer. Then Harry realized this was a muggle instant picture.

A strange feeling came over Harry. He pulled the picture out of the album and studied it closely. A wave of shock came over him. On the stand behind his mother stood Snape's potion timer. His heart started pounding again. Then Harry saw something that made him flip to the front of the album, grab the lock of baby hair, paused to get something out of his trunk and raced down the stairs to the common

room. The next second he changed into his phoenix form then burst into flames, materializing a moment later at the door to Snape's private quarters.

Banging his fist hard on the door Harry panted from running down the stairs from the boys' dorm. "Come on wake up." Harry muttered then knocked on the door again. Suddenly the door opened to Snape's angry face.

"Potter, have you gone completely insane?" Snape growled his hair ruffled with sleep.

Harry pushed his way into the room and gave Snape the lock of baby hair. "Look."

The anger did not dissipate from Snape's face as he shifted his gaze to the hair in his hand. His eyes narrowed a bit. "This could have waited until sun up Potter.'

"I thought so too. But this couldn't." Harry then gave Snape the muggle photo of his mother.

Frowning Snape gave a disinterested shrug. "It is too early to play guessing games Potter. What do you want me to see in this?"

"Look in the mirror behind my mum." Harry watched Snape's face closely. The dark eyes opened wide.

"I don't believe this." Snape hurried over his desk and lit a lamp with a wave of his hand. He bent closely over the photo. "I took this picture?" Harry had followed to stand beside him.

"Look closer. See what's around your neck." Harry pointed at a crystal vial.

"I'm not sure what that is Potter." Snape pulled the picture closer.

"It's this." Harry held up a delicate gold chain with a shiny object swinging on the end. "A time leaper my mother sent to the future."

“What?” Snape stared at the shimmering vial.

“Don’t you see?” Harry was breathing hard. “You went back in time to help my mum find the runespoor.”

“I... ?” Snape gazed back at the photo seemingly at a lost for words.

“Look at yourself. You aren’t the same age as my mum.” Harry insisted. Snape froze in his examination of the picture.

“You are right Potter. I look as I am now.” Snape handed the picture back to Harry and began pacing. Harry knew enough not to interrupt the potion master when he was thinking.

“The Slytherin book is mine.” Snape said thinking aloud and he stopped to stare at Harry for a moment then went back to pacing. “There is no possible way there could be two copies of that book. I must have taken it from my private library sometime in the past. I would be able to return to Snape Manor with out the Dark Lord’s followers attacking me.”

“And you would know when you weren’t there.” Harry said quietly then added. “You must have given her the other dark arts books too.”

“What other books?” Snape turned to Harry.

“I don’t know if I should tell you. Maybe you should pick out what you think I’ll need.” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Why would I give you dark arts books?” Snape stared at him.

“Besides Professor Dumbledore, who knows Voldemort better than the two of us?” Harry said. Snape flinched at the name but didn’t try to correct Harry. “You can tell me things Dumbledore might pass by as dark magic.” Harry then looked a bit dismayed.

“What?” Snape asked.

“He did it again.” Harry sighed. “Professor Dumbledore said he hoped we would learn to...”

“Put up with each other?” Snape offered. Harry laughed.

“That’s what I said. How did he put it?” Harry thought a moment. “He hoped we would learn to appreciate our differences and how they can work together instead of against each other.”

“Perhaps Potter.” Snape said slowly then walked to a small kitchen area. “Sit down. Do you want some tea?” Harry nodded and took a seat on the couch. The potion master soon handed him a cup then sat down on the other end. Blowing on his tea Snape took a couple tentative sips obviously still thinking hard. “But why would your mother trust me? Especially an older me? Your father certainly would not.”

“Maybe you had something that convinced her.” Harry took a sip of tea.

“Perhaps a letter from the Headmaster.” Snape said as if testing the theory.

“I don’t think so.” Harry shook his head. “He seemed really surprised when we found the time leaper. He said he had never seen a time leaper like this one.”

“In any case I do not think the Headmaster would approve of such a leap in time, good intentions notwithstanding.” Snape said. “And speaking of the Headmaster, as much as I hesitate to keep something of this magnitude from him, I do not think we should mention our findings Potter.” The man’s dark eyes met Harry’s.

“I agree.” Harry nodded slowly. “At least for the time being.”

“Nor should you share it with any of your friends. The risk of changing things is too great.” Snape still held his eyes and Harry nodded his agreement. It seemed to satisfy Snape because he leaned back and took another sip of tea.

“So you think my mum would believe a picture?” Harry said.

“Photos can easily be fabricated.” Snape countered. “Besides I must be careful not to reveal too much of the future, especially inadvertently.”

“She knew things.” Harry said softly. “Remus said she knew things. Maybe she just knew you could be trusted.”

“Perhaps, though I do not relish being charmed by her in the event she doubts my words.” Snape said then took a long sip. “The next question is when do I go?”

“Well, it must have been after my first birthday party.” Harry said. When Snape looked puzzled he added. “I have a muggle video of the party. She still had long hair.”

“That is when I arrive, which remains a constant no matter when I leave here.” Snape explained. “And that is the big question. When do I go back in time? Now? Six weeks from now? After the final battle with the Dark Lord?” He questioned. “There are many unanswered questions Potter.”

“I know.” Harry sighed and looked at the picture again. Looking into his mother’s eyes he tried to will the still figure to give him some sort of clue. But only sad green eyes stared at the camera.

“May I Potter?” Snape held out his hand for the photo. Harry gave it to him. As he studied it Snape grumbled. “Why a muggle photo? A wizard picture could at least point to what we needed to see.”

“The runespoor once said she didn’t have much time to talk with my mum.” Harry said. “So maybe she didn’t have time to get a magical photo developed.”

Snape had frozen again. “Or perhaps she needed a clue that would not change. Look at the potion timer Potter.” He gave the picture back to Harry and hurried over to his desk. He picked up the timer and brought it back to the couch and set it down on a stand he conjured with a wave of his wand. “If this were a wizarding photo the potion timer would have kept running.”

"The front time says thirty minutes past seven." Harry said still examining the photo.

"What if that means the thirtieth day of the seventh month?" Snape asked he moved the front hands of the potion timer to the same time. "What does the second hand read?"

Harry stared hard at the clock face. "I'm not sure." He handed the picture to Snape.

"It is on a one." Snape glanced at Harry. "You should have your glasses checked. Since you were born in 1980, I believe that is the destination time."

"What about your departure time?" Harry leaned in to look at the picture. "Is it there?"

"Yes. In the mirror. One minute before eight." Snape squinted at the clock. "And I believe the hand is on the six. Which means I go this summer." He sat back on the couch and stared at the timer.

"How did my mum have your timer? You said it had been in your manor as long as you could remember." Harry asked. "And who started this whole time leaping thing? You or my mum?"

Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose in frustration. "Time travel paradoxes always did make my brain hurt. Go back to bed Potter. It's too early in the morning to ponder such issues."

"Yeah, I better get a couple hours in before the quidditch match." Harry stood up then paused. He held out the lock of hair and the time leaper. "I'll leave these with you for when you need them. Thanks for listening Professor."

"It all makes sense now." Snape took them looking almost relieved. "No wonder I couldn't remember being with your mother when we found the runespoor. I have not yet been there."

Harry had just reached the door when he whipped around. "You could save my parents. You could warn them about Wormtail."

“Think about, what, you are asking Potter.” Snape said very quietly. “For almost fifteen years the Dark Lord reign had been in check. Only this year has his killing spree continued.” Snape’s gaze was almost sympathetic. “Your parents’ death saved not only you but thousands, perhaps millions of people. Would your parents want others to die in their place?”

Harry dropped his eyes to the floor as his heart thumped wildly at the fleeting thought of saving his parents. He shook his head and took a couple of deep breaths. With a quick wipe of his cheek Harry looked up. “If you can... tell my mum.... I’m alright. Tell her...” Harry turned away and put his hand on the doorknob. He wanted to go with Snape so much. To meet his parents, to touch them but he knew he couldn’t.

“I will tell her; her son is a powerful wizard.” Snape said softly. “A person worthy to be her son.”

“Thanks Professor.” Harry said hoarsely and quickly left Snape’s quarters. The feeling of excitement, of finally figuring out some of the mysteries surrounding his mother’s trunk was gone. Now a dull ache thudded in his chest as Harry tried to sleep. Trying not to think about this summer when Snape would see his mother.

Author’s notes: Thanks for the reviews!!

Wow, this is like trying to braid with little wispy hairs, I have to make sure I get most of the ends tucked in. LOL

The werewolf thing; maybe a werewolf wouldn’t voluntarily confine himself, their wolfish instinct to go bite something wouldn’t allow it. Lupin had someone escort him to the shrieking shack when he was in school. And even though it was boarded up moonlight probably came through cracks. (Good theory heh? LOL)

Chapter 54

A warm breeze blew through the changing room as Harry put on his scarlet quidditch robes. He was tired but the thrill of playing quidditch again took the place of a good night's sleep. Ron called 'Let's go.' And the team trooped out on to the quidditch pitch.

Harry gave Cho a smile as he stood across from her before Madam Hooch blew her whistle to start the match. When he kicked off from the ground Harry felt the wind flutter his robes as he soared high above the field. The blue sky was painted with streaks of clouds that looked like roads running off into the heavens.

A whoosh came by him and Harry ducked as a bludger ruffled his hair. He climbed higher to let the other players do their jobs. Scanning the field Harry's heart stopped. The golden snitch fluttered near the ground by the Ravenclaw goal. In a second Harry went into a spectacular dive not taking his eyes off the snitch. The air roared in his ears as he urged his broom faster. He was vaguely aware of Cho rushing toward the snitch from the other end of the field.

The snitch shot upward. Harry pulled his broom to follow. Cho mirrored his action and they were neck and neck, climbing straight up. The Firebolt pulled away and Harry felt a surge of triumph as he knew the snitch would drop a stone by the feel of the air. Faster, he needed to fly faster was the only thing in Harry's thoughts. Cho cried out when the snitch fell practically into her lap but for some reason she missed it. She pointed at Harry as he flashed by chasing the snitch.

A whistle blew loud and long. "Foul!" Harry heard Madam Hooch cry. He looked around angrily to see who had the penalty and saw others pointing at him. Then he noticed scarlet wings to either side of him. Harry had transformed into a phoenix. Instantly he changed back into his human form.

"That is not allowed." Madam Hooch admonished as she flew up to him on her broom.

"Sorry." Harry flushed. He hadn't meant to change. It had just happened. Ravenclaw received a penalty shot but the chaser couldn't

put the quaffle past Ron. Harry sighed with relief then streaked off searching for the snitch again. The unintentional change into his phoenix form rattled Harry. He didn't know why it had happened. Taking a deep breath he forced his mind back on the game. A flash of light caught his eye and for the second time Harry took off after the golden snitch. His eyes half closed against the rush of air on his face Harry saw the snitch change paths but had anticipated the move. He could see every little detail in the rapidly fluttering gilded wings.

A shrill whistle blew. Madam Hooch cut across Harry's flight path. "Stop. I have told you that changing into your animagi form is not permitted." Harry looked down and saw golden talons gripping his broom. Immediately he returned to his human form. "I will not tell you again Mr. Potter." Madam Hooch warned. "Your teammates have called time out." She pointed to the ground and flew off to the middle of the pitch.

Harry landed by Ron his face red with embarrassment. "I don't know what's wrong. I don't mean to change." He said without waiting for Ron to speak.

"It doesn't matter." Ron said firmly. "But we can't chance it again, Harry." He said apologetically then turned to Ginny. "You're going to be seeker..." Ron proceeded to shift the players around. Then he turned back to Harry. "I'm sorry Harry. It's the only way."

"I know." Harry sighed then held out his broom. "Here Ginny. You might as well use my Firebolt." She took the broom and gave him a kiss.

"We'll win for you." Ginny said.

"Let's go." Ron kicked off from the ground and the rest of the Gryffindor team followed. Harry watched then glanced up at the stands. Professor McGonagall sat in the first row clapping as her team caught the quaffle when play resumed. Ignoring the whispered mutterings from the crowd near by, Harry quickly climbed to where his head of house was sitting.

“Sit down Potter.” McGonagall moved over so Harry could join her but kept her eyes on the game.

“I don’t know what’s wrong Professor. I didn’t mean to change...” Harry felt miserable as he stared at her watching the match. Slowly a smile spread across her face.

“It was to be expected Potter.” McGonagall turned to gaze at him her eyes held a glint of humor. “Or did you not read the material the ministry gave you on animagi even after I explained the testing?”

“Well...” Harry flushed. “Not all of it.”

“I thought not.” McGonagall snorted and turned back to watch the game. “If you had read the handout you would have known in the later stages of becoming a full fledged animagi, one may experiences spontaneous changes to their animagi form.” She sighed as Ravenclaw scored. “I just wish you could have chosen a time when your human form was less missed.”

“So there’s nothing wrong with me?” Harry felt relieved and a bit floored that McGonagall hadn’t mentioned this aspect of transformation just to play a little trick on him.

“No, Potter there is not a thing wrong with you.” McGonagall said with strained patience. “You will be practicing to maintain your human form rather than your animagi form in our next sessions.” Then she stared down her nose at him. “Now you know why it took me three tries to pass the test.”

Harry grinned at her then they both turned their attention to the match. Seamus had the quaffle and was throwing for goal. “Go Seamus!” Harry yelled. “Yes!” He had scored, sixty to thirty.

“Look at Miss Weasley.” McGonagall clutched Harry’s arm in excitement. Ginny lay flat on the Firebolt speeding after the snitch. Cho was close behind but falling back.

“Keep your eyes on the snitch.” Harry whispered. “Come on Ginny.” Then his stomach dropped and he jumped to his feet shouting.

"Watch out Ginny!" But as Ginny closed her hand around the fluttering golden ball she collided with an upright post on the stands opposite them. She fell ten meters to the ground into a crumpled heap. In two flashes of fire Harry was by her side.

"Ginny?" Harry croaked. She moaned and at the same time held up the snitch.

"I didn't take my eyes it." Ginny whispered and opened her eyes.

Harry gave a half laugh. "Hold still. I think your leg is broken."

"Everything feels broken." Ginny groaned again and closed her eyes as her teammates gathered around. Ron dropped to Ginny's other side.

"You did it Gin." Ron said. "You won the cup for us again."

"No the team did." Ginny insisted.

"Get out of the way." Madam Pomfrey pushed her way through the team. The nurse conjured a stretcher and levitated Ginny on to it. Madam Pomfrey held her wand in front of her and floated Ginny back to the hospital wing, the team following in her wake.

Harry paused to pick up his broom and froze. A small crack ran from the tip to halfway down the handle. He stared at the gap for a long moment before shaking himself out of his shock and running to catch up with the team.

After Madam Pomfrey treated Ginny's leg the team filed in to discuss the match. With great effort Harry kept his mind off his cracked broom. Nor did he feel the need to tell Ginny about the damage. A party had just begun when the nurse shooed them all out. The festivities continued in Gryffindor tower but Harry was very subdued. He couldn't stop picking up his Firebolt and fingering the crack and wondering if it could be repaired.

The celebration finally was called to a halt by Hermione at midnight. Harry lay awake for a long time thinking of Ginny. When he couldn't

stand it any longer he slid out of bed and removed his invisibility cloak from his trunk and slipped his feet into the boots of silence.

The infirmary door clicked loudly as Harry tried his best to ease it open quietly. He stole silently to the side of Ginny's bed. For a long moment he gazed at her sleeping, Harry thought she looked like an angel. An angel with freckles, a smile spread across Harry's face then he reached over and brushed her cheek with a single finger. She sighed and shifted in her sleep. Getting a bit bolder, Harry removed the cloak from his head and leaned over to lightly kiss her lips.

Her eyes blinked open. "Sweet dreams sleeping beauty?" Harry whispered.

"Harry!" Ginny gasped. "What are you doing here? You could get in terrible trouble."

"Well, if you want me to go." Harry looked crestfallen and went to put the cloak back over his head.

"No I didn't mean that." Ginny grabbed at his arm, invisible under the cloak. When Harry laughed, Ginny realized he was putting her on. "You."

"I learned from the best." Harry grinned. "Is there room in that bed for me?" Ginny hesitated for a moment then lifted the sheet and Harry quickly slipped in beside her. "Oh." Harry froze.

"What?" Ginny started scooting over. "Need more room?"

"No, it's just." Harry's face turned pink. "Well, you aren't wearing very much."

"Most people don't at night when it's warm." Ginny snuggled closer to him smiling sweetly but mischievously. "You'll just have to behave."

"Oh I see." Harry leaned in and kissed her the base of her neck then nibbled his way up to her lips. He paused as she melted against him. "Who will have to behave?"

“Uh?” Ginny opened her eyes, they had a glazed look. She shook it off. “I can’t think when you kiss me like that.”

“Like how?” Harry asked innocently. Ginny proceeded in showing him exactly what she meant. Soon he lay breathless on his back with Ginny grinning down at him. “You explain.... Things..... very well.” He said between breaths and she giggled then snuggled into the arms.

“I’m glad you’re here.” Ginny said quietly. “It’s too quiet in here to rest well.”

“Yeah.” Harry said, his heart still thumping hard in his chest. “Uh. How is your leg? I should have asked before I crawled in with you.” He had to think of something mundane for a while, instead of the soft thinly clad body pressed against his.

“It’s fine. I have to stay here a couple of days.” Ginny said. “Oh, how is your Firebolt? I thought I might have damaged it when I hit that post.” She felt Harry tense and rose up to look at him. “Oh Harry. I’m sorry. Is it bad?”

“I don’t know. It has a small crack that runs halfway down the handle, it may be repairable.” Harry pulled her down against him. “Don’t be sorry. You did exactly what you were supposed to do.” He paused. “With the possible exception of not watching where you were going. Ooooff.” Ginny had squeezed his ribs.

“All right wise guy.” Ginny sighed and relaxed against him again. “I know that broom means a lot to you.”

“Yeah.” Harry sighed too. “But even if it isn’t fixable, it isn’t like my nimbus that was shattered. At least I’ll still have it to hang on the wall or something.” Neither one mentioned the Firebolt had been a gift to Harry from Sirius.

“I wanted to ask you. Couldn’t you have healed your own leg?” Harry changed the subject.

“I thought about trying as Madam Pomfrey floated me back to the castle. But she cautioned against trying to healing myself.” Ginny said

a little puzzled. "She said I could risk diminishing my empathic abilities. Something about I need to feel the other person's need."

"I remember Dumbledore saying something like that. You get stronger sharing your strength with others." Harry grinned. "Maybe you could share some now?"

"Oh yes, where does it hurt?" Ginny giggled as she ran her hand over the t-shirt stretched across his chest. "It must be here. This shirt is too tight for you. Can you breathe?" She kissed his neck

"It fit...uh...last summer..." Harry was finding it hard to focus on words. "I thought you were supposed to share your strength." He swallowed hard. "I feel like a twenty pound weakling when you touch me. Like every bone in my body has disappeared."

"Are you comparing me to Lockhart?" Ginny eyes flashed but Harry knew, or he hoped she was kidding.

"No! You certainly know more about defense against the dark arts than he ever did." Harry defended. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to keep her still. "You are definitely less annoying."

"Oh that's a big compliment." Ginny laughed then yawned.

"I better go. Don't want to push my luck too much and get caught sleeping with you." Harry said reluctant to extricate himself from Ginny's arms.

"Be careful going back. I think Snape is on patrol." Ginny warned giving him a last hug before he got out of her bed.

"Nobody can see me or hear me." Harry bragged. "Not even Snape." He pulled her close for another kiss.

"Unless he sees you before you leave the hospital wing, Potter." A smirking cold voice drifted from the door. "Isn't this nice and cozy?"

Harry practically fell to the floor as he scrambled out of the bed. "Professor, it's not what it looks like. We were just talking."

“Oh is that what it was when Miss Weasley had her lips clamped to yours? A different tongue is it?” Snape sneered as his tall thin outline slowly walked into the light of the moon shining through the windows.

“Alright you caught us kissing but that’s all we did.’ Harry gazed at the pale man.

“Kissing isn’t against school rules. However, you are out past curfew and in the bed of a female student which is not allowed.” Snape met Harry’s eyes. “I will have to consider a suitable retribution for you Potter.”

Retribution? Harry’s brow furrowed as he stared into those dark eyes. What did he mean by retribution? “I suppose I have detention.” He ventured. Harry still didn’t like the look Snape was giving him.

“I was thinking more along the way of a bribe.” Snape smirked. “I will forget I found you out of bed Potter for the next five runespoor’s eggs. And do not forget you still owe me one.” Snape continued to stare at Harry then added. “Close your mouth Potter you look like a dead cod. Do we have a deal?”

Harry shut his mouth and nodded, in shock by this side of Snape. He was going to get off with only the runespoor’s eggs as payment. He better agree before Snape backed out or someone else came along. “It’s a deal, Professor.”

“I thought it might be acceptable. Get back to Gryffindor Tower Potter.” Snape turned to Ginny. “Be thankful I do not mention this to your parents or brothers. I suggest you get some rest Miss Weasley.” With that Snape turned and left the infirmary.

The trouble with the way Snape had behaved was Harry couldn’t talk about it to Ron and Hermione. Ron would surely go ballistic with the mere mention of Harry crawling in bed with Ginny. And Hermione would not be impressed with Harry sneaking down to see Ginny in the middle of the night.

Thankfully Snape never mentioned Harry's escapade in runespoor reading sessions. But Harry often thought there was a slight smirk on the man's face that had nothing to do with what was being read.

On the last Friday of May Harry escorted the runespoor down the many stairs, across the entrance hall and out on to the lawn. Harry had promised Hagrid he would bring the runespoor to the seventh year Care of Magical Creature class, since he no longer had Defense against the Dark Arts. Although all of the Gryffindors still met in the gym and took it upon themselves to practice as hard or harder than Malahide would have made them.

"It is a fine day to be outside in the sun." Kesho flicked her tongue Harry's ear when they paused to let a class of frightened looking first years pass on their way to Herbology.

"Yes, why do you keep us cooped up in the castle all the time?" Giza hissed.

"Well, some people are afraid of you." Harry had to choke back the word snake. "And the weather has really just turned warm enough for you."

"Yes, we like it warm." Hapa agreed as she followed Harry down the green slope to Hagrid's cabin. "We are going to see the large man?"

"Yes. His of class seventh years have never seen a runespoor. Well, some might have caught a glimpse of you but this will give ever one a close up view." Harry explained. "And be nice okay?"

"And what is the sport in that?" Giza said. "We do have our reputation to maintain."

"You heard me." Harry said firmly. He saw the seventh years grouped around Hagrid whose head rose easily four feet above the tallest student. It looked to Harry Hagrid had something on his arm he was showing the class.

Giza gave a loud hiss as they approached the backs of the students. Many turned around and quickly backed away. Harry didn't try to stop Giza. He could tell she was having fun as the affect of her sound rippled through the class opening a path for them to Hagrid.

Then in a shriek and a growling hiss, Harry knew what Hagrid had on his arm, Fawkes the phoenix. The runespoor rose high above Harry snapping with all three heads as the phoenix dove at her with talons and beak.

"Stop!" Harry shouted. The seventh years' screams and shouts added to the din. "Watch it Hagrid!" Harry ducked as Hagrid tried to grab the runespoor to keep her from biting the phoenix, the big man's arms flailed as the massive coils tripped him. Hagrid landed hard on his back and the ground shook.

Even though he knew it was risky Harry changed into his phoenix form. He had to get Fawkes out of here. A set of fangs chased him higher. Harry saw Fawkes diving for another attack. In desperation, not knowing if it would work Harry grabbed the golden tail and soared upward. The next instant he burst into flames, materializing a second later in a circular office bathed in the afternoon light. It had worked Fawkes was with him. The phoenix buffeted Harry with his wings and chattered angrily.

"Harry? Fawkes? What is going on?" Dumbledore ducked to allow wing room for his phoenix irritated soaring around the room. Harry changed and stood panting by the desk a large scratch seeping blood on his hand.

"Hagrid didn't tell me he was having Fawkes there too when he asked me to bring the runespoor down." Harry panted. "Evidently nobody told him they don't like each other much. I better go back and calm down the runespoor, Professor."

"Yes. Thank you Harry for bring Fawkes to me." Dumbledore called as Harry disappeared in a flash of fire.

Behind Hagrid cabin Harry changed back into his human form and ran around to the front. The runespoor laid coiled, hissing and spitting

at everyone. Hagrid was talking to her trying to coax her over to him. "Sorry everyone." Harry said brightly even though his inside still shook. "It seems the runespoors and phoenixes have some long time grudge."

This caused a loud spitting from the runespoor and all three heads turned to Harry with their eyes flashing and hissing loudly. "Calm down." Harry told them. "I didn't know Fawkes was down here. He's gone so just get a grip." He stroked each head as he spoke to lighten his words.

"Why doesn't it like phoenixes?" A seventh year Hufflepuff boy asked.

"We better let her calm down before we go asking her." Harry said, knowing full well the runespoor understood the question. "This is Kesho." He petted the middle head that had finally settled down and rested on his right shoulder. "She's the dreamer of the three. Although, I would add philosopher to that description." Kesho bumped his cheek with her nose. "She doesn't say much but when she does it give a person lot to think about."

"This is Hapa." Harry stroked the head to the right of Kesho. "She is the planner and decides where the runespoor is to go and what it does next." Hapa puffed up her neck and hissed.

"This is Giza." Harry reached out to pat the head on the left side of Kesho but Giza pulled back and snapped at him. "Hey stop it." Harry knew she hadn't really meant to bite.

"Why am I always the last to be introduced?" Giza swelled her eyes flashed.

"The best is always last." Harry quipped hoping not to make the other two huffy just to pacify Giza. It worked. She deflated and rested her chin on his left shoulder, flicking her tongue in his ear. "Giza is poisonous and is the critic of the two others and anyone else she feels needs her advice." The tense class laughed as Giza hissed at him reproachfully.

"Do you have any questions?" Harry asked the class.

"What does she eat? Or is it they?" A girl with straight brown hair asked.

"Anything they want." A tall pale Slytherin broke in. The class laughed as did Harry.

"Mostly rats." Harry paused as Giza hissed at him. "Big plump warm rats." He repeated pointing at Giza to indicate where the words were originating from. "The 'she and they' are a bit confusing but they don't seem to be too fussy about being addressed singularly or all together." Harry answered.

"How long is she?" Cho asked. Harry hadn't seen her in the group until now.

"I'm not sure I've never measured her." Harry asked the runespoor to stretch out to full length. He managed to suppress the smugness he felt as the runespoor complied with his request. "There, someone want to measure her? For the record?" Cho looked taken aback but since she had asked she stepped forward conjuring a tape measure as she did.

"Will you hold the nose end?" Cho grinned holding out the end.

"Chicken." Harry laughed and took it to the tip of Kesho's nose. Cho stretched the tape to the end of the tail.

"She's seven point six meters long." Cho announced. There was a low "Wow" from the other students and a lot of murmuring as Cho vanished the tape measure and stooped stroking the tail as if she was being daring.

"Thank you." Harry told the runespoor who pulled her tail from Cho's hand and curled in a patch of sun. It looking like she was falling asleep. "Hey don't go to sleep. You're not getting off that easily."

"What do you want now?" Giza flicked her tongue at him.

"We all want to know why you don't like phoenixes." Harry said in English so the other students would understand. "And don't go off in a huff. You have avoided this story for too long." Harry stepped in front of Hapa who had started to slither off toward the sunny lake. All three heads turned and stared at Harry for a long time then turned and stared at the awaiting students and Hagrid.

"Very well." Hapa hissed. "Speak my words Master. Speak so these young ones will know the darkness of those evil birds."

"Everyone sit down and be quiet." Harry hurriedly told the class. "And don't interrupt."

Kesho made a chair for Harry out of their brightly colored coils laying her head on his shoulder. Hapa puffed and hissed as the students formed a semi-circle around them. Hagrid sat down on a chair just outside his door. Giza started an unintelligible hissing that did not stop until Hapa was through with her tale.

Harry repeated her tale, getting a rap on the head if he missed even the smallest of words.

"Listen ye witches and wizards so ye might know of the treachery of the phoenixes in the days of old." Hapa started. "Our lives go back years beyond thy grasp of time. When wizard kind ruled all and the children of men were mere fodder for their whims." A few of the students looked uneasily at each other but kept still.

"Mighty be our first Master both in strength and power. Many envied him and tried to take his kingdom away but he was too powerful and defeated all who tried."

"Of course he had us by his side and we were no small worm even then." Giza broke in hissing loudly as Hapa snapped at her to be quiet it was her tale to tell. Giza argued hissed and bared her fangs. Harry pulled them apart explaining the argument as he managed to quiet Giza to a low hiss and get Hapa back to her story.

"Master ruled a large land including some mountain wizards who liked those traitorous birds. I remember many wizards from the mountain in

audience with my Master with one of those scarlet demons on their shoulder.” Harry wanted to tell Hapa to keep her emotions out of the story but was afraid she would quit telling it if he did so he kept quiet.

“Our Master knew not of filthy phoenixes preferring clean serpents for company. One day he over heard a rumor of a golden phoenix egg. He did not think phoenixes laid eggs so he asked a mountain wizard who knew of such things and told him; ‘Verily indeed. The story is true. To be my life time!’ The wizard seemed excited. ‘To see the golden phoenix! That is what will hatch from the egg. Only once in his phoenix’s life had there been a golden egg.’ Also our Master learned it would take seven full moons before it hatched”

“Many long nights our Master paced and considered the significance of such a happening. Then on the forth moon our Master said he had made an arrangement with the mountain people for the golden egg.’

We had long been used of wizards taking our eggs and it seemed no great thing that our Master wanted this golden egg. But he wanted us to hatch it. As long as we were kept warm and well fed we did not object.” Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. A basilisk was produced by hatching a chicken egg under a toad. What would come out of a phoenix egg under a runespoor?

“The mountain wizards reneged on their word and refused to let our Master have the golden egg. A great battle ensued. Master had many friends at his beckon and call. And he had us!” Hapa said with pride then her head drooped. “Long was the battle and bloody was the ground around us. But alas, thee who think legs are needed, his foot stepped into a hole and he fell, dropping the shield in the dark night and he could not find it because he had to continue the fight.

We waited and heard cries of ‘Death to Helel ben Shaha’ ring over the rocks. Then footsteps approach. It was not our Master but he knew our speech and the spell that binds us to the shield compelled us to follow when he picked up the device.” Hapa fell silent for a long moment and Harry stroked her telling her it might help her feel better if she told her story.

“The new master tried to make us believe our rightful master was wicked and evil.” Hapa continued and another chill went down Harry’s spine. “We knew better but were still bound by the shield to protect the new master.” Hapa swallowed several times.

“Our true Master had worked his way up to the mountain. None could stand his wraith. But we could not protect him from the attack of the phoenixes.” There was a collective gasp from the students. “Yea, scores of those scarlet birds of carrion attacked my Master and us powerless to help. Our new master came down to watch the assault but did not see wizard behind him with a bow made by the children of men.

Not being made of magic nor having any magic properties the arrow penetrate the magic of the shield. The shield dropped to the ground and we were free to go to our beloved Master.” Hapa breathed deep and hard.

We brought the shield to him and wrapped him in our coils, protecting him as we have always had from further harm.” Every word of Hapa’s seemed to come with great effort. “He had been pierced by many sharp dagger like beaks in the chest. His strength was fading fast but with his last breath he gave us the right to choose to leave if the shield is dropped.” Hapa quit speaking abruptly, Harry rubbed her head.

“Thank you Hapa. I know that was hard for you.” Harry ignored several students with their hands up, wanting to ask questions. “Why don’t you go lay in the sun by the lake. Perhaps you could catch a frog.” He said brightly to her as they slithered off. He met the eyes of the class and shook his head, silently telling them to wait. When the long length had disappeared Harry took the first question.

“I may be wrong but isn’t the name Helel ben Shahaar another name for the devil?” A short sandy haired Ravenclaw girl asked. “It sounds like her first master was the worst of dark wizards.”

“I’m afraid agree but from her perspective she loved him and will probably not hear a word against him.” Harry said. “My job is to try to convince her the phoenixes were just misdirected.”

“Good luck.” Several students said.

“Well, Harry that was a great tale.” Hagrid came over and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Thanks for bringing her down here today.” A loud gong sounded that ended the afternoon class. The students thanked Harry too and walked back up to the castle.

“Have you ever heard anything about a golden phoenix’s egg?” Harry asked as he dabbed at the scratch on his hand with a clean cloth Hagrid had handed him.

“Can’t say I have.” Hagrid said. “You might ask Professor Dumbledore seeing he’s got a phoenix and all.” The big man looked thoughtful. “I wonder what ya would get if ya hatched one under a runespoor.”

“I don’t even want to think about it.” Harry shuddered. “I’ll see you later Hagrid. I better keep an eye on the runespoor so she doesn’t scare too many people.” Soon He sat down next to the runespoor and stroked the thick coils. Harry let the runespoor lay in the sun for a long time. Hapa was unusually quiet so Harry told her about his years at Hogwarts ending with losing Sirius and how it was his fault.

“Dear master.” Hapa finally rose and put a head on his shoulder. “You can not live in this world without loss, good and bad. I am very old and have seen many masters come and go. You are our youngest master and....” She lifted her head to stare at his face. “Perhaps I am too old for changes and that is why I feel this way but ... I hope you are our last.”

Author’s notes: Sweet sweet reviews!! Thanks you for all the kind words.

Someone picked up a clue in the photo not yet mentioned! Good for you!

Miss Granger has been taken out of the hospital wing and put back where she belonged, snogging with Ron.

I just found out that Snape and I have the same birthday! Is this a good thing?

Chapter 55

A hot June sun made greenhouse four a steaming sauna. Sweat trickled down the side of Harry's face as the class milked cowsilk plants. These strange black and white plants hung from long brown tentacles and had six long thick black and white leaves with large hard knobbly tips hanging to the floor. In the midst of the leaves was a bladder which needed to be milked. One student would hold the plant's leaves while the other did the milking. Ron lost his grip on the one he and Harry were working on and was so kicked hard in the chest he fell flat on his back.

The job Hagrid had for them next in Care of Magical Creatures class proved just as strenuous. A herd of tiny rainbow sheep needed to be sheered. Although there were over five hundred sheep, the herd would easily fit into Hagrid's cabin. The sheep bleated and baaed as wool of every color was carefully snipped from their bodies while Hagrid explained how the wool from this herd was used to make all the drapes and bed hangings in the castle.

"It won't protect you from magic or nothing." Hagrid told them. "But it's the type of wool that keeps you warm or cool just as ya need."

Soon the class was covered with bits of multi-colored fluff sticking to their sweaty arms and faces. Pansy Parkinson complained loudly about doing farm work as did most of the Slytherins with the exception of Malfoy. The pointed face was covered with dirt and wisps of wool but Malfoy remained silent the entire class.

Hot, dirty and smelling of sheep Harry, Ron and Hermione trudged back up to the castle after the class thinking longingly of a quick shower before dinner.

"I think I'm going to just jump in the lake to wash off." Ron said shaking his hand in the air futilely trying to detach a bit of green wool from his fingers.

"That sounds like a great idea." Harry caught Ron's eye and darted his eyes to Hermione and grinned. A broad smile broke across Ron's face and in one movement he and Harry scooped up Hermione in

their arms clasped together like a chair and started running toward the lake.

“Don’t you dare!” Hermione laughed then shrieked. “Wait!” There was real panic in her voice as they approached the water’s edge. “Let me put my bag down.” Harry and Ron slowed just long enough for Hermione to drop her bag and then the pair flung Hermione and themselves into the lake.

Harry thought sure he heard a hiss of steam when he hit the water. The chill took his breath away. When Harry surfaced he was dunked immediately by Hermione but he pulled her under with him. She sputtered and shook her thick hair out of her face. Ron grabbed up Hermione and tossed her farther out into the lake then dove in after her. They came up kissing. Harry closed the distance and dunked both of them then quickly scrambled up the bank but didn’t quite make it to the top before he felt Ron and Hermione’s hands on him and was hauled back into the water to be submerged a couple more times.

Seamus, Dean and Neville stood on the bank laughing. Seamus tried to push Dean into the water but Neville and Dean teamed up to shove Seamus in. Neville and Dean teetered on the bank momentarily after pushing Seamus when Parvati and Lavender stole up behind and squealing with glee tipped them over the edge. The water shot up like a fountain when they hit.

Harry couldn’t stand the smug looks on Parvati and Lavender’s faces. He tapped Ron who was having a furious splashing fight with Hermione. “Let’s get them.” Harry nodded his head in the direction of the laughing girls. Ron grinned then choked as water went up his nose. One last splash at Hermione and Ron and Harry quickly scaled the bank.

Lavender screamed shrilly and both girls started running but they had only taken a couple of strides when Harry and Ron caught their arms. “All Gryffindors into the water!” Harry shouted ignoring Parvati’s half-hearted pleading. He hoisted her over his shoulder and carried her back to the lake followed by Ron toting Lavender. It was evident the Lavender and Parvati felt every bit as hot and as grimy as all the

other Gryffindor sixth years because neither put up much of a fuss as they were tossed into the water.

Despite the warm day the lake water fed by melting mountain snow was quite chilly. So in a short time all the Gryffindors laughing and dripping wet climbed out of the lake gathered up their bags, Harry's and Ron's were back where they had picked up Hermione, then they sloshed back up to the castle grinning at the audience their antics had drawn.

The smiles faded as the face of Argus Filch greeted them looking down at them from the top step into the castle. "You can wait out here until you are dry. You're not mucking up my floors." Mrs. Norris meowed rubbing against Filch's legs.

"But we're freezing!" Parvati said, her teeth chattering.

"Cross into the castle and I'll have you in detention for the rest of the year." Filch warned his eyes narrowed to a slit.

"What are we going to do?" Lavender asked shivering.

"I guess take detention." Parvati sniffed. "My toes are numb." There didn't seem to be any way around it. Harry sighed. Why did everything that was the least bit fun seem to be against the rules to Filch?

"At least you can change into your phoenix form and avoid Filch." Hermione said to Harry as they followed Lavender and Parvati up the stone steps.

"Good idea!" Harry grabbed Hermione's arm. "Wait Lavender, Parvati hang on." He waved the girls closer and called to Dean, Seamus and Neville. He saw Filch craning his neck trying to see what the group was up to as Harry explained what he wanted to do. When they broke apart they were all smiling.

"You are right Mr. Filch." Harry said loudly. "I wouldn't dream of messing up your floors." He changed into the scarlet bird and slowly flew higher.

“That’s only one of ya.” Filch smirked then his mouth dropped open as Ron grabbed Harry’s tail feathers with his right hand and held Hermione’s hand with the other. Hermione’s feet barely left the ground when a flash of fire made the three of them disappear. Five seconds later the phoenix Harry reappeared and offered his tail to Parvati and Lavender.

Harry might have been able to transfer all of his classmates at once but he didn’t want to risk anything going wrong, not to mention the common room ceiling wasn’t that high for that many people to be dangling from his tail. Laughter rang out as Harry arrived for Dean and Seamus, flying a bit higher before bursting into flame amid the cheers of Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs.

A clear tone rang out when Harry swooped down for Neville. The round face boy grinned nervously as he soared into the air clutching the golden tail feathers. But Harry didn’t burst into flames right away. He had seen something at the edge of the Forbidden Forest and hovered in the air, forgetting Neville shivering below him. A glimmering flash of pure white darted through the trees. A unicorn, then Harry sharpened his gaze as the creature stopped between two trees and stared back.

“Harry?” Neville squeaked. Harry looked down and felt guilty for leaving Neville, literally hanging. But when he glanced back to see the unicorn again, it was gone. Harry and Neville burst into a wall of noise when they returned to the Gryffindor common room.

Dinner in the great hall tasted very sweet to Harry. Filch had been lurking in the entrance when Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had arrived for dinner. He glared at Harry with his upper lip curling into a silent snarl. Harry gave him a smile and let Ginny go ahead of him into the great hall.

“I wish I could have seen his face when you took Neville away.” Ginny said as they found seats at the Gryffindor table.

“It was priceless.” Harry said as he reached for a plate of pork chops.

"I've decided. I'm definitely going to be an animagi too." Ron announced. "I'll ask Mum and Dad and even if they say no after I turn seventeen I won't need their permission."

"That's great Ron." Harry grinned. "I don't think you will regret it. I'll help any way I can."

"Thanks Harry." Ron said.

"I wonder what sort of animal you will become." Hermione stopped eating to study Ron. Evidently Ron had expected Hermione to object because he seemed genuinely surprised by her comment with no cautions.

"I think a lion." Harry said thoughtfully.

"Why do you think that?" Ginny asked around a mouthful of food. She was eating hurriedly. She wanted to get back to studying for O. W. L.s which had started today.

"I dunno." Harry flushed a bit. "He's got the courage of a lion."

"Cheers Harry." Ron raised his glass of pumpkin juice to him. "I was hoping for something useful. I know I won't be anything as exotic as a phoenix but any type of bird would be cool. We could fly together."

"What about you Hermione are you going to be an animagi?" Harry asked.

"I have thought about it." Hermione said slowly then looked at Harry a bit concerned. "Would you be awfully disappointed if I didn't become an animagi?"

"No." Harry frowned. "Why would you think that?" He looked at Ron as if wanting a translation. Ron shrugged.

"Well, your dad and Sirius...and well, Wormtail all became animagus together and I thought maybe you would expect me to join in." Hermione said sheepishly.

“Oh.” Harry smiled gently at her. “I do appreciate the sentiment Hermione but unless you really want to don’t do it on my account.”

“I haven’t decided one way or the other.” Hermione said quickly. “But I’m glad you are okay with it if I choose not to.”

“Don’t even ask me.” Ginny rose from the bench. “I don’t want to think of anything else but O. W. L.s.”

“You would be a fox.” Harry said touching her red hair as she gave him a peck on the cheek.

“I’ve got to go.” Not listening to what Harry had said, Ginny pulled away and hurried from the great hall.

“What are you the animagi seer?” Ron snorted.

“No because I was quite wrong, I think you will be a hairy tarantula.” Harry shot back. “Then you can be afraid of yourself.”

“Ha ha. You’re a riot.” Ron managed without flinching. “Do you still have to go to Snape’s tonight? Aren’t you done with that book yet?”

“Not yet.” Harry sighed. His meetings with Snape had taken on an almost agreeable quality with only slight tones of hostility welling up occasionally. “We better finish soon. Term is almost over.” After he had finished eating Harry told Ron and Hermione he would see them later in the common room to study for their finals exams.

After translating only two pages of the Salazar Slytherin book, Snape paused to discuss his pending time trip. “There are many unanswered questions, Potter.” Snape commented for the umpteenth time.

“I know.” Harry said automatically. “Have you learned how the time leaper works yet?”

“To a point.” Snape’s eyes flashed with triumph and Harry knew the man had been waiting all day to tell him.

“How.” Harry sat up straighter on the couch. The runespoor still liked lounging by the fire in Snape’s dungeon quarters.

Snape opened a drawer in his desk and removed the time leaper. It shimmered as it swung from the chain. “When I look through it thusly.” He grasped the vial between his left fore finger and thumb then held it up to his eyes, across the bridge of his nose like a pair of glasses. “And I turn the crystal forward; I see glimpses and shadows of time yet to be.” Snape took the vial down from his eyes and continued. “The more I turn it to the future the darker the shadows and fewer images are clear.” Harry stared at the potions master astonished.

“That’s great Professor.” Harry rose from the couch and walked to Snape’s desk.

“Hardly Potter.” Snape sighed in frustration. “I still do not know how to activate it nor do I know how to get to a specific time. Not to mention how do I go back in time? I can not go to the ministry and ask for a time turner to do so. Even if they would have one that could take me fifteen years back in time I doubt if they would happily hand it over to me. ”

“But it’s a start.” Harry insisted.

“The question which is bothering me the most is why?” Snape gazed thoughtfully at the time leaper in his hand, turning it idly. “Why did I decide to go back in time to give your mother dark arts books and to find a mythical shield?”

“Are you sure you started the time loop?” Harry questioned.

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “You have been reading again Potter.” Snape’s thin lips twitched. “No Potter I am not positive but it seems likely.”

“But why not just give me the books? Why go back in time to do it?” Harry asked.

"If we did not have the common interest in the Slytherin book and the runespoor to...how shall I say... force us together, I doubt very much if you would have accepted dark arts books from me Potter." Snape's dark eyes met Harry's.

"Good point." Harry kept the man's gaze. "You right I probably wouldn't have. But what about the runespoor shield?" Harry added. "Who do think started the hunt for that?"

"That is a mystery Potter." Snape sighed again and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "That is where the time paradox makes my head ache."

"I can tell him where we were." Hapa said sliding over to Harry's side. "When the crimson furred woman first spoke to us."

Snape blinked as if processing the information after Harry told him what the runespoor had said. "But if I learned of your whereabouts from you..." He frowned and shook his head. "I think there are many pieces of the puzzle missing."

"Maybe some will be answered when you see my mum. Harry said quietly.

"I hope so." Snape nodded. "Still the paramount problem is still learning how to work this." He held up the time leaper.

"You haven't tried the snake speech potion?" Harry asked.

"Obviously." Snape sneered. When Harry gazed at him reproachfully he softened his tone. "I speak with the runespoor and the cobra in Burkina Faso so I must take it then. If I use it now and the potion would wear off before I return to the past I have no means of making more."

"But Hermione said potions with human blood usually last forever." Harry questioned.

The key word there Potter is, usually." Snape returned. "I do not want to find out the Snake Speech potion is an exception to the rule too late to correct my error."

"Oh." Harry sighed and his eyes fell onto the potion timer on the corner of Snape's desk. "What do you know about the Potter family?" He looked at the man at the desk. Snape's eyes smoldered and he looked about to rage at him. Without raising his voice Harry said firmly. "I am not my father." He met the cold back eyes which seethed nothing but hatred. It was a full minute struggle for Snape to finally speak in a hoarse controlled voice.

"I know you are not." The hatred drained from the dark eyes, filling with a look of overwhelmed tiredness. "I know you are not Mr. Potter." Snape repeated then remembered the question. "I know very little of your family history."

"Don't you think it curious that your family had this timer with the Potter name on it?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps one of your ancestors was a clockmaker." Snape said in a bored tone and to Harry's surprise the man managed to keep the anger out of his voice. "And one of my ancestors merely purchased this."

"If nothing else was odd I would agree." Harry said. "But with this time travel paradox looming over us I think it is significant."

"You might be right." Snape nodded. "One thing I wanted to suggest." He seemed uncomfortable all of a sudden. "Only a few more pages remain to be translated in the Slytherin book but I think we should continue to meet until more pieces of this puzzle fall into place."

"I agree." Harry said quickly. So that's why Snape had been stopping after only a couple pages.

"Perhaps you should stay at Hogwarts for the summer holidays." Snape proposed.

At this suggestion Harry's face fell but he managed. "I haven't decided what I'm doing for this summer." His voice was neutral. "Professor Dumbledore said I didn't have to back to the Dursleys."

“Surely you are not considering returning to the muggles?” Snape looked stunned. “After what they did...”

Harry looked at him sharply. “If I don’t go back the charm that protects them from Voldemort and the Death Eaters will expire. Harry said dully.

“And you care because?” Snape sneered. “Ah yes. Gryffindor bravery and self-sacrifice courageously rising high above your own needs.”

“Perhaps.” Harry said not rising to the taunt. “But there has been enough death and she is my mother’s sister.”

With the words foolish and thick headed Gryffindor ringing in his ears Harry left Snape’s quarters before ten that evening. Instead of flying Harry climbed the many flights of stairs to the portrait of the Fat Lady, wanting to think as he walked. There would be conditions to be met if he went back to the Dursleys, he considered. He would not put up with their abuse again. By the time he arrived in the common room Harry had decided to write the Dursleys a letter.

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The next evening Harry arrived at Dumbledore’s quarters with the letter he had finished for the Dursleys. They sat on a balcony sipping tea as Dumbledore read over it.

‘Dear Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon,

Professor Dumbledore has said I need not return to your house this summer. I imagine you are as thrilled of this news as I am. However the charm that has protected me from Voldemort and his followers will expire if I do not return to your house for a short time each year. This spell has also protected all who have lived in your house.

As you know, Voldemort is at large again. Mrs. Figg was just one of his victims this year. You need to know he could try to get to me through you. So if you want me to return to keep the protection charm active here are the conditions.

No criticizing me, my friends or wizard kind in general.

I want to learn to drive a car.

I want a refrigerator with food, telephone, television, VCR and computer in my room this summer. (Don't worry I'll pay for all of it.)

My friends may call and visit if they want.

I'll need new clothes because I've outgrown most of my mine.

So that's the terms of my returning to your house. If you want the protection sign the enclosed form and give it to Hedwig. I'll need it before the school term ends.

If you choose not to sign, good luck and good life to you, for you will not see me again.'

Sincerely,
Harry Potter'

"I see only one flaw in this Harry." Dumbledore raised his eyes from the parchment. "I will not allow you to pay for any of these things you request for your room."

"But I can afford them." Harry shrugged.

"So can the Dursleys and they owe you at least that much." Dumbledore said firmly. He pulled out his wand from his robes and erased the offending line. "May I add a post script?" He asked and Harry nodded. Dumbledore beckoned with his finger to a scarlet quill and ink pot on a desk and they flew to the small table between them. As the headmaster wrote he asked. "Do you think your Aunt and Uncle will agree?"

"I honestly don't know." Harry shrugged. "I know my Uncle will be purple with rage when he reads that, probably glad to be done with me." He considered for a moment. "But after he's had a chance to really think about it....He's seen what Voldemort can do so he might have second thoughts." Harry shrugged again. "In any case, I've spelled it all out for them. So if they decide not to take my protection I won't feel guilty by not offering it."

"I will not say you shouldn't feel guilty because I would probably do the same thing." Dumbledore said eyeing him. When Harry met the clear blue eyes they looked sad.

"What?" Harry wondered what was bothering the old wizard.

"You are not telling me something." Dumbledore made it a statement not a question.

"Well, yeah. I can't." Harry sighed, not breaking eye contact. "You do trust Professor Snape? Right?"

"Yes. I trust Severus Snape." Dumbledore smiled slightly. "That is the first time I have heard you use his title."

"Perhaps he has earned it." Harry sighed. "But it seems I have to trust him too. Let's hope for both our sake it isn't misplaced. I'll tell you this much I...we've learned something about the time leaper. That's as much as I can say without..." Harry searched for his words.

"Without risking altering time." Dumbledore finished, his gaze into Harry's eyes sharpened. "I think I understand now."

Harry slumped. "Please don't tell Professor Snape I've said anything. He'll think I've told you all about it."

"Harry, what we say here, stays here." Dumbledore said simply and then his eyes twinkled a bit. "So it's Professor Snape who uses the time leaper." The old wizard chuckled at the look on Harry's face.

"He's going to kill me." Harry sat back and gazed out across the castle lawn. "Don't you get tired of knowing everything?"

Dumbledore laughed again. "Now that would be boring, to know everything." His blue eyes moved to the stars becoming brighter in the evening sky. "I once heard a saying....how did it go?" He pondered for a moment. "The difference between the knowledge of the most learned man and the knowledge of the least learned man is insignificant when compared to all that is yet unknown. I can not remember who said it though."

"I like that." Harry repeated the quote, watching several owls gliding over the forbidden forest. "I'll have to remember that one for Hermione." They sat in silence enjoying the cooling summer evening. "I've wanted to ask you. What do you know about the Potter family? Do you know if any of my ancestors were clockmakers?"

"Not that I can recall." Dumbledore said. "At one time the Potters were as numerous as the Weasley family."

"What happen to all of them?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore sighed. "Dark wizards often target the weak and in the hearts of all Potters swelled the need to protect those who needed them."

"So they were killed off?" Harry felt a weight in his chest.

"Not by just one dark wizard over night Harry." Dumbledore explained. "The Potters decreased over many centuries of being at the front of any battle of good over evil." Harry nodded without speaking.

"You said you would take me to see my parents' graves, before the school year ended." He looked expectantly at the old wizard.

"Professor McGonagall said you went to see their graves after the funeral of the Finnikans." Dumbledore said.

"But I didn't have much time." Harry objected. "I didn't even go in the mausoleum in the middle of the family plot."

"Of course you didn't. I should have thought of that." Dumbledore said. "We could go now if you wish."

"Now?" Harry looked out at the darkening sky.

"How thoughtless of me." Dumbledore looked appalled by what he had said. "Of course you do not wish to visit a cemetery at night. Forgive me."

It took a few minutes before Harry realized what Dumbledore had meant. Harry almost laughed. "I'm not afraid of a cemetery at night Professor." He met the blue eyes again. "I've already seen the worst thing to come out of a cemetery at night so I feel I'm pretty safe visiting any now."

"I do tend to underestimate you Harry." Dumbledore reached out and patted Harry's shoulder. "So if you wish, we can take a port key right to your family plot. That cemetery is protected from muggle eyes so we won't be seen."

"I better get a cloak. The air has gotten cooler." Harry rose with Dumbledore who had gotten up to find a suitable port key.

"I have one you may borrow." The headmaster took an emerald cloak from a peg near the hidden door and handed it to Harry. "It may be a bit long."

"Alas, hand me downs again." Harry grinned as he threw the cloak over his shoulders.

"By Merlin! You are beginning to sound like me." Dumbledore laughed then lifted a blue cloak from a peg. Then took a hand knitted scarf which had been under the cloak. Harry recognized Mrs. Weasley's work. "Portus." Dumbledore tapped the scarf with his wand. It glowed blue and shivered for a moment then looked normal. He held out the scarf and Harry put a hand on it. "One two three."

The cool night breeze rustled the leaves of a large holly tree as Harry walked over to the dark stone shaped like two joined hearts. The grass felt soft and a sent of spice rose in the air, mingling with the day's remembered fragrances of lilac and honeysuckle.

The white mausoleum kept the Potter family plot from total darkness. Although not emitting any light it reflected Dumbledore's lit wand tip so they could read the stones around it. For a long time Harry stared at his parents' graves not speaking and Dumbledore seemed content to let him.

"I don't know what to feel." Harry finally said with a huge sigh. "I didn't know them, not really."

"Perhaps not on a conscious level but you were with them long enough for them to imprint on your mind and on your heart." Dumbledore said quietly.

"I feel empty." Harry blinked and reached out to touch his father's name. "Who picked out the headstone?"

"The task fell to Remus." Dumbledore said soberly. "Later, when all the confusion of the time subsided."

"I can't imagine how he felt." Harry swallowed hard. "His friends dead, one thought to be a traitor....then to have to choose a headstone."

"Remus went through a very difficult time." Dumbledore agreed. "I'm glad you wrote to him this year. It has helped him." Harry turned to the white granite building, reading the corner stone. The inscription had changed.

"Threefold the stride of Time, from first to last:
Loitering slow, the Future creepeth-
Arrow-swift, the Present sweepeth-
And motionless forever stands the Past."

"Do you wish to go in?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes." Harry led the way to the entrance.

"You must enter first." Dumbledore said walking onto the long shallow steps leading to the door. "Only Potters are permitted to open the door."

Standing before the marble door, Harry saw an intricate design etched in the surface. Something was familiar about it but he couldn't remember what it might be. He pushed the handleless door and it swung open easily, revealing a black void. Harry hesitated.

“Go on.” Dumbledore urged. “A light will activate when you enter.” The headmaster was right. After taking a deep breath, Harry put only one foot onto the unseen floor the walls suddenly glowed pale yellow and each name carved in white marble seemed to be illuminated separately.

Why Harry had been expecting the inside to fit the outside dimensions of the mausoleum he didn't know. After six years in the magical world he should have expected the rows and rows of individual tombs that greeted his eyes.

Dumbledore moved to stand beside Harry. “It has been a long time since I've been here.” He gestured to the left at a double sarcophagus. “Your grandparents.”

“Why weren't my parents place in here?” Harry asked gazing at the empty place beside his father's parents.

“There was not a Potter to open the door.” Dumbledore said softly. “You were too young and in grave danger.” Harry nodded his understanding. “You could have them moved here if you wished.” The headmaster added.

Feeling Dumbledore's eyes on him, Harry still stared at the spot obviously reserved for his father. “If I have them moved in here,” Harry's voice cracked with emotion. “Could a stone be placed for Sirius in the place they are now?”

When Dumbledore didn't answer right away Harry turned to face him and saw tears flowing from the blue eyes. Finally the old wizard placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and said in a hoarse voice. “I think that would be very appropriate.”

Harry sighed and patted Dumbledore's arm and the wrinkled face gave him a wry smile through the tears. “I am supposed to be here as a comfort to you.”

“You are Professor.” Harry said quietly. “More than you know.” He turned back to the other tombs. “Tell me about the ones you knew.” Harry nodded at the tombs.

Dumbledore started with Harry's grandparents. Then the headmaster spent the next two hours introducing Harry to his relatives. Including a great great great great uncle Leopold Potter who had invented floo powder.

"I can't wait to tell that to Ginny." Harry laughed. "Where is the oldest crypt?"

"I believe to the right of the entrance. The newly deceased are traditionally put near the door on the left." Dumbledore explained. "So the mourners could visit without needing a map to find them. The original tombs are usually on the right so they may be honored as well." They stopped in front of two very old stones, very plain white granite with a simple inscription.

"Phillip Potter Born 455 A. D. Died 686 A. D.
Alma Potter Born 425 A. D. Died 688 A. D.

The surest poison is time"

"What's that?" Harry suddenly noticed a two small circle indented on the corner of Phillip Potter's headstone.

"I do not know." Dumbledore peered closer. "I can not touch anything in here without severe consequences. But you, as a Potter, may press it and see what it does."

"Uh, alright." Harry wiped his hand on his robes and gingerly pressed a forefinger into one circle. It clicked but nothing happened. He sighed with relief hesitated then poked the second circle. A bright blue blazed momentarily blinding them in the subdued light of the mausoleum. It burned brightly for several moments. Harry blinked trying to see through his watering eyes. Slowly the blue light dimmed and hovering over the stone was a small hour glass. "What?" He reached out and closed his hand around it. The blue light went out instantly.

"It is a time turner." Dumbledore said thoughtfully staring at the object in Harry's hand.

“So that’s how...” Harry said softly then gave a guilty look to Dumbledore. “Do you think it would be alright if I took this to study a bit? I’ll bring it back.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore said solemnly. “This is the Potters’ mausoleum. You have the right to anything in here.”

“Oh yeah.” Harry said then carefully slipped the time turner into his robe pocket.

“I think we should return to Hogwarts. You do have to study for exams.” Dumbledore reminded him.

“There’s one more grave I would like to visit.” Harry said abruptly. Dumbledore looked puzzled but nodded and exited the crypt first. When Harry went through the door, it shut with a sharp clunk and a sigh of many whispers.

A little disoriented in the dark it took Harry a while to find the headstone he wanted to see. The trouble was the inscriptions on many of the stones had changed since Harry had seen them briefly. Again, why this surprised Harry made him shake his head at his own naivety. But finally with Dumbledore’s help Harry found Fredrick Potter’s tombstone.

“I wanted to look at it closer.” Harry said. “Professor Snape’s potion timer was made by a F. Potter.”

“Indeed.” Dumbledore said. “Strange there are no dates.”

“That’s what I thought when I passed it before.” Harry stooped to examine the stone. The epitaph was the same. ‘His time’s forever, everywhere his place’. “I wonder what happened to him. The book I have on the Potter family tree said he just disappeared.”

“Strange a stone was placed for him at all.” Dumbledore commented. “In the past wizards were very superstitious about erecting a

tombstone when no known date of death is available and some still are leery of it today.”

Reading the same inscription over again Harry noticed three faint clock faces etched in the stone under the name. The first showed a time of nine o'clock. The second face's hands were placed at six and the third at seven.

A strange feeling made the hair on Harry's neck stand up. There was a connection he just knew it. He sighed. But tonight wasn't the night to figure everything out. "I'm ready to go back Professor." Harry said standing from crouching near the stone.

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"Thanks for taking the time to take me to the cemetery." Harry said after they had taken a port key to Dumbledore's quarters.

"You are quite welcome Harry. We can return another night if you wish." Dumbledore said.

"Maybe after I talk with Remus about the stone for Sirius." Harry said quietly. "Oh, my letter." Harry picked up the scroll then followed Dumbledore through the fireplace into his office .

"Good night Harry." Dumbledore said.

"Good night Professor." Harry hesitated. "Uh, do you mind if I take the quick way back to Gryffindor tower?"

"Not at all." The old wizard chuckled and warned. "Mr. Filch is on the hunt for you. So do be careful to stay out of his way."

Ginny was alone in the common room when Harry arrived. Her head resting on an open potions book. For a long time Harry just gazed at her sleeping then he stole up beside her and kissed her cheek, then quickly ducked as Ginny took a wild swing with a closed fist.

"Hey is that any way to treat your boyfriend?" Harry grabbed her arm.

“Harry?” Ginny’s eyes focused and she looked around. “I was having the oddest dream. Malfoy wanted to marry me. And all I wanted to do was hit him.”

“A fine thing.” Harry sat down beside her looking hurt. “My girlfriend dreaming of another guy, Malfoy no less.”

“I’ll sooth your poor dented ego.” Ginny said. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “How’s that?”

“I think I need a little more soothing.” Harry took her into his arms and hugged her close, nuzzling her neck. She smelled of honeysuckle. It felt good just to hold her in his arms after the visiting the cemetery.

“What’s wrong?” Ginny asked pulling back a little. “You seem sad.”

“Well, maybe a little.” Harry pulled her close again to bury his face in her red hair. He told her about visiting his parents’ graves as he kissed her neck and nibbled her ear. “You feel so nice in my arms, warm and alive.” He sighed as he rubbed her back and her hands wandered through his hair.

“I love being in your arms.” Ginny sighed then yawned. “I’m sorry.”

“Time for bed, sleeping beauty.” Harry kissed her thoroughly before pulling her to her feet and firmly leading her to the door to the girls’ dorms. “Good night Ginny.”

“Good night Harry.” Ginny slipped up the stairs and out of sight.

Harry climbed the spiral stairs that lead to his dorm. Ron and Neville seemed to be having a snoring contest, taking turns and seemingly getting louder each time. Harry pulled off his robes and the letter to the Dursleys fell out. He picked it up set it by his pillow with his wand. After putting on pajamas Harry climbed into his four poster bed and shut the hangings around him. “Lumos.” His wand tip illuminated the letter. He wanted to read what Dumbledore had written.

“P. S.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dursley.

This is Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School. I wished you to know I have read and approved Harry's letter to you. I also wanted you to know the generous nature of his offer. He is under no obligation to return to your house to protect you at all. And even after your years of abusing and neglecting him, he feels compelled, not by any feelings of warmth whatsoever towards you, but by his loyalty and love for his mother to offer his protection to her sister.

I am most likely wasting my time writing this but I must say you have missed knowing a person of great worth by not treating Harry like a son. If you are wise you will take the little time you have left with your nephew and get to know him. And perhaps Harry will find it in his compassionate heart to forgive you as he has me.

Bear in mind that signing the enclosed form constituted a binding magical contract. Breaking such a contract will mean considerable penalties not to mention my wrath.

Cordially

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. “

Forgive the Dursleys? Was Dumbledore serious? Harry rolled the letter and placed it on his bedside table with his glasses and extinguished wand. He lay back on his pillow and rubbed his eyes. He didn't want to think of the Dursleys. His mind went to Ginny instead. As he washed in pleasant thoughts of Ginny's kisses he drifted off to sleep. The feeling of pleasure and happiness carried him into a dream of bright sunshine and laughing happy people.

A dark grey cloud suddenly blotted out the sun. The sounds of people changed to screams. Abruptly Harry woke sweating and shaking. He clapped his hand against his scar. A prickling pain shot through his scar for the first time since Voldemort had possessed him.

Harry slid out of bed and went to the nightstand by the window to get a drink of water. After several gulps from a shaking glass Harry stood gazing into the forbidden forest feeling a bit unnerved. He had known

the pain would come back. He hadn't been so foolish as to think he was done with it completely. But Harry had hoped he could get through the rest of the school year without his scar bothering him again. He leaned his forehead against the window to cool his scar. Voldemort was angry. About what, Harry didn't even care at the moment. He went back to his bed and settled down. Taking deep cleansing breaths Harry focused on clearing his mind and pushing the pain away.

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Author's notes: Thanks again for all the reviews!

First off, please be patient with updates. The time has come for many things to mesh together and I don't want to mess this up by trying to rush to get it done then forgetting something vital to the plot and story. I do have a clear...okay a scribbled out-line as to how things happen so I hope I haven't forgotten anything. I've re-read this so many times...I'm making myself crazy...okay crazier.

Perenelle, Snape's birthday is January 9th. One site said it was the 8th but they do have a retraction saying on JK Rowling's site said it was the 9th. So the three of us have the same birthday! Or I should say the four of us. My oldest brother was born on Jan. 9th too!

Do a search on Helel ben Shahar and see what comes up! I do a little research to find names that are believable and to check facts, although some facts may get a bit blurry to fit into the story. LOL

Chapter 56

A bright ray of morning sun fell on Harry's face, waking him much earlier than he had wanted. His scar throbbed with a familiar dull ache as Harry dressed in a daze. He would have preferred to have stayed in bed but there were things he wanted to do before breakfast.

When Harry tried to feed the runespoor the rats he had brought up the night before, Giza hissed and complained about the cold rodents and refused to eat. Harry tried to hush her because the other boys still slept. Hapa and Kesho seemed a bit on the moody side too and joined Giza in refusing to eat the cold rats. Finally Harry promised to bring fresh food and left the dorm hoping the runespoor would settle down.

The owlery was busy with owls swooping in after a night's hunting. Harry called Hedwig to him. She fluttered down on a low perch and held out her leg. After tying the letter for the Dursleys to her leg Harry stroked her.

"This may be the last time you'll have to see them." Harry told her. "Uncle Vernon might try to shoo you away but wait until after he reads the letter and decides if he's going to sign it or not before you come back, alright?" The great amber eyes blinked and Hedwig hooted softly. Harry took the snowy owl off the perch and walked to the window with her. "Safe flight." He called as she spread her large wings and soared off.

In the middle of descending all the long staircases through the castle Harry clapped himself on the forehead then changed into a phoenix and the next instance he stood outside the potions master's quarters. He rapped sharply on the door.

"I should have known." Snape appeared half dressed. A white undershirt stretched across a thin bony chest was fairly normal but the skinny white legs shoved into pink fluffy slippers made Harry's mouth hang open. "Is there something you wanted Potter or did you come to ogle at my slippers?"

"Yeah, I mean yes. I have something to show you, Professor." Harry wrenched his eyes from the pink footwear as he followed Snape to his small dinning table where a kettle whistled and the daily profit was spread out. Pink? Why on earth?

"The headmaster seemed to think I needed some color in my wardrobe." Snape hadn't needed Legilimency to know what Harry was thinking. "And one does not lie to the headmaster about wearing something he has given them."

"Uh, right." Harry bit his lip to keep from saying what he wanted to say. "Never mind that. I thought you would be interested in this." Harry removed the time turner from his robes pocket and held it out to Snape.

"Indeed." Snape slowly took the hourglass. "Where did you get this?" Harry briefly explained of his trip to the Potters family plot. Snape listened intently then frowned. "Do you think the time leaper was in the other circle?"

"Yes, don't you?" Harry said, studying the man's face, wondering what he was really thinking.

"Perhaps, but don't you think it odd why your mother didn't remove both the time leaper and the time turner?" Snape said.

"My mother couldn't have removed either." Harry said. "Professor Dumbledore said only a Potter could remove or even touch anything in the mausoleum."

"She had you." Snape pointed out. "She could have used your hand to retrieve the items."

"I suppose she could have. I never considered that." Harry said. "Anyway, at least we know how you go back in time."

"Yes," Snape drawled reproachfully. "And I suppose our dear headmaster knows also?"

"I didn't tell him anything...well, except that we had found out something about the time leaper....He just figured things out from there." Harry said sheepishly. Snape gazed sternly at Harry. "What?"

"I still don't like you, Potter." Snape said blankly.

"I'm not going to send you flowers any time soon either, Sir." Harry snorted.

"Your flagrant breaking of rules and lack of discipline is something I detest." Snape's eyes smoldered.

Harry frowned, what was this about? "Your bullying and favoritism make you the most deplorable teacher I've known, Sir." They stared at each other.

"As long as we know where we stand with each other, Potter." Snape blinked. "On the other hand, I have developed, grudgingly of course, a modicum of respect for you."

"Now don't get all mushy on me, Professor. I won't be able to keep my breakfast down." Harry smirked.

"Get out Potter." Snape growled but Harry saw the corners of his thin lips twitch.

As he closed the door behind him Harry said sincerely. "Thanks Professor Snape."

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Walking down the dungeon corridor Harry found the way blocked by Crabbe and Goyle. The two hulking figures had their arms crossed over their chests and grinned malevolently at him. "You're out of bounds Potter." Crabbe grunted.

"Get out of my way." Harry wasn't the least bit afraid of these brutes anymore.

“Or you’ll do what?” Goyle stepped forward and reached out to grab Harry. But Harry was too quick and before either had even a thought to take out their wands, Crabbe and Goyle lay stunned on the stone dungeon floor.

“Nice one Potter.” Malfoy walked around the two bulky figures on the ground. Harry didn’t answer and started down the hallway to the stairs that led to the entrance hall. Malfoy hurried after him. “Wait Potter, I want to talk to you.”

“What do you want Malfoy.” Harry put a foot on the step and half turned to look at the pale blonde.

“I just wanted to say, I thought about what you said and you’re right.” Malfoy moved up a step so he was eye level with Harry. “I don’t want to answer to the Dark Lord any more.”

Harry’s laugh echoed down the rough hewn walls of the dungeon hall. “Snape was right. You do lie worse than I do.” Malfoy went paler, except for a patch of pink on each cheek. Harry turned and took a couple more steps before he was stopped again.

“I’m serious Potter.” Malfoy grabbed Harry’s arm. “I don’t want to end up like my father.”

“Okay.” Harry said slowly. “That’s good. Uh, see you around.” He took another step but was halted again by a hand on his arm. “Get away from me Malfoy. I don’t care how many times you say it I’ll never believe you.”

“Then what can I do to convince you?” Malfoy asked. “You name it I’ll do it.”

For a moment Harry stared into the pale grey eyes then searched his mind for a task. Harry straightened his shoulders and put both feet on one step. “I’ll take a task from Voldemort, to prove you’re telling the truth.” Harry saw Malfoy flinch.

“What?” Malfoy took a step back.

"Kill your father." Harry kept his face as stone like as he could. Malfoy swallowed hard and his face drained of all color.

"Kill....my father?" Malfoy choked.

"It seems to be the way to the top. Voldemort killed his father. His most faithful servant, Barty Crouch killed his father. So if you really want to be on our side, killing your father would be the perfect way to prove yourself." Harry folded his arms across his chest. He could see Malfoy's chest rise and fall in short breaths. A couple of younger Slytherins pushed passed them on their way to breakfast but Harry never took his eyes off Malfoy.

"Okay." Malfoy licked his lips and swallowed hard. "I'll do it." He nodded and squared his shoulders to match Harry's stance.

"I thought you would." Harry shook his head and started up the steps again.

"Wait. What do you mean?" Malfoy dogged after him grabbing his arm again. "I said I would do it."

"If you were really on my side Malfoy, you would know." Harry stared piteously at the pale blonde.

"Know what?" Malfoy's face was pinched and confused.

"You would know 'my' side would never ask you to do such a thing." Harry said steadily. "We don't work that way."

"Snape has killed people." Malfoy blurted out. "I know he has."

"Nobody ordered him to do it. He did what he had to do." Harry said forcibly. "There might be sons facing fathers in the end but it will be their decision, not forced upon them. Now get away from me." He pushed past Malfoy again and looked up to find Hermione staring at him from the entrance hall with a horrified look on her face.

Malfoy glared at the both of them and hurried past to the great hall. "Harry, I can't believe you asked him to do that." Hermione whispered

almost fearfully as Harry joined her on the top step. "And I can't believe he said he would."

"You watch out for Malfoy." Harry said as he walked with her to the great hall. "He'll try to get to you next. I know he will. But don't you believe him."

"I won't." Hermione frowned. "What were you doing down in the dungeons this early anyway?"

"I had to tell Snape something." Harry said sitting down at the almost empty Gryffindor table. "Sorry can't tell you what. What are you doing up so early?"

"I had a meeting with Professor McGonagall and Professor Dumbledore." Hermione gave him a sly smile. "And I can't tell you what that was about."

"What are you up to Hermione?" Harry helped himself to kippers.

"You'll find out soon enough." Hermione smiled smugly then took a bite a toast still looking teasingly at Harry. "We both can have our little secrets."

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The day seemed to drag for Harry. With the dull ache in his scar Harry felt tired and irritable most of the day, but he wasn't the only one. The runespoor flatly refused the rats Harry offered her, hissing and complaining about the size and how the rats weren't really fresh. Then later in the evening when Harry and the runespoor were in Snape's quarters Giza kept hissing making it hard for Harry to hear Hapa read. They both decided to give the runespoor a night off and Harry took her back to his room.

"Harry, Can't you make that snake shut up?" Seamus complained in the dark dormitory. "We have exams tomorrow."

"I'll try." Harry sat up and slid to the edge of the bed where the runespoor's bed stood. "What is your problem Giza? You've been hissing all night?"

"She's dim-witted." Hapa hissed. This triggered a snapping match between Hapa and Giza. Harry pulled them apart.

"Listen, I'm ordering you to be quiet." Harry said firmly. "You can hiss all day tomorrow when we're not here." Silence met his words. "Thank you. Good night." Harry had barely settled down and closed his eyes when Giza started hissing again.

"Harry!" Seamus pleaded.

"I'll take her down to the common room." Harry sighed then called to the runespoor to follow him. Hissing even louder the serpent trailed after him down the spiral stairs. "Are you cold? I'll light a fire."

"It is always cold here." Giza complained.

"Stone walls are always cold." Hapa hissed. Harry pointed his wand at the fire place and the low burning embers flared to life. "There you can warm up by the fire." Still hissing the runespoor curled up on the hearthrug. Harry hesitated. He wanted to go back up to his bed but didn't think he should leave the runespoor alone in this mood. Sighing Harry conjured a pillow and lay down on the couch, with the fire blazing he didn't need a blanket.

In the morning Giza was still hissing at everything and nothing. Not even the freshly caught mice, courtesy of Crookshanks and Cleo, could tempt them into eating. Harry left for the day's classes feeling uneasy and worried. Hermione suggested a dose of sunshine might be what the runespoor needed so Harry brought the serpent down to the lake to lie in the sun while they studied during the afternoon break.

Giza continued a now constant hissing as the large serpent moved restlessly in the sunny patch of grass. Harry, Ron and Hermione watched the runespoor anxiously. "Harry?" Hermione stood up suddenly and cautiously stepped closer to the runespoor.

"Something's the matter with Hapa's eyes. Giza's and Kesho's too. Look!"

His heart in his throat Harry eased over to examine the runespoor. Instead of bright shiny orange orbs all three sets of eyes were dull, bluish and almost opaque. "I'm going to go get Hagrid." Harry said with fear in his voice.

"I'll go." Ron stopped him. "You better stay here with her. You can keep her calm." He sprinted off towards the gameskeeper's cabin. Soon he returned trotting beside Hagrid's long strides.

"Hagrid, there's something wrong with the runespoor. Look at her eyes." Harry stepped aside to give Hagrid's size more room. "Careful she's been really irritable."

"Let me see wha's all the fuss is about." Hagrid's tone confused Harry. The large man seemed quite unconcerned as he peered cautiously at the runespoor. "Ah, just as I thought. There's nothin' wrong with her Harry. She's just sheddin' her skin. I'd imagine it make anyone a bit moody."

"Shedding her skin?" Harry laughed with relief but the sound caused more hissing from the runespoor. "What can I do to help her?"

Hagrid rubbed his neck and glanced around thoughtfully. "She needs dirt mor' an grass. Like where she comes from. Dry and a bit gritty to help her rub her skin off."

"I wonder if anybody would mind if I made a patch of arid land in the sun." Harry pulled his wand out, glancing about to see if a teacher was watching.

"I don't mind and seeing how I'm still the gamekeeper around here, yeh have my go ahead Harry." Hagrid's beetle black eyes crinkled. He knew Harry hadn't considered him an authority figure.

"Thanks Hagrid." Harry concentrated on the land he had seen in Burkina Faso then pointed his wand on the grass in the afternoon sun.

A feeling of satisfaction flowed through him as the grass dissolved into a dry savannah.

“Cool Harry.” Ron whistled.

“Yeh might wanna give her some rocks and logs ta hide under and scrape against.” Hagrid suggested then pointed. “And yeh’ll need to make another one o’er there where the mornin’ sun hits.”

The runespoor seemed to taste the different ground. All three heads flicked their tongues and hissed a chorus as Hapa hastened to the patch of dry earth. “Thanks again Hagrid. I didn’t know what was wrong with her. How long will this take?”

“Should take abou’ a week or two, she’ll be done by the end of term.” Hagrid patted Harry’s shoulder causing his knees to buckle. “I’d better be getting’ back to the class. Don’t wann ‘em bowtruckles to scratch som’ens eyes out.” Hagrid hurried back to his cabin.

After dinner Harry, Ginny, Hermione and Ron took their books and went down to the lake to keep the runespoor company. Hermione helped Harry cast a heating spell on the sandy soil to keep it warm through the night. All three heads had the skin pulled back like a hood but none were in a mood to talk and ignored their visitors. Hagrid stopped by to check on the runespoor just as the four were getting ready to head back to Gryffindor tower.

“I fergot to mention I got a letter from Madam Wilch wonderin’ when yeh would be able to meet with her.” Hagrid said as he walked with them back to the castle. “I’ll owl her and tell her the runespoor is a bit indisposed.” The four chuckled. “She’ll be disappointed I warrant. Seems the kneazle she brough’ here in January mated with a stray cat ‘stead of the kneazle she had planned. She wanted the runespoor to find out why.”

“I don’t know why she would object. Crookshanks is sweet.” Hermione said.

“So is Cleo.” Ginny said.

“Madam Wilch said the only good thing; she only has the one kitten to find a home for.” Hagrid rummaged around in his coat. “She sent a picture. So if yeh know anyone who’d wan’ a black and white kneazle bred cat, let me know.” At the words black and white cat, Harry had stopped walking and seemed made of stone. Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Hagrid turned back to see what was wrong.

“Harry?” Ginny waved her hand in front of his face.

“Hagrid.” Harry’s voice cracked and gave a long blink. “Could I see the picture?”

“Sure.” Hagrid handed the photo to Harry outstretched hand looking a bit concerned.

“Lumos.” Harry held his wand close to the photo, one look and he closed his eyes and took deep breaths. “Hagrid, I know someone who needs this kitten very much.” Harry held out his hand to stop the questions from the others. “I can’t explain what I’m about to say. You’re just going to have to trust me.” He waited until Ron and Hermione exchanged looks and Ginny gave a nodded.

“Of course we trust yeh Harry.” Hagrid said without hesitation.

“Hagrid, please convince Madam Wilch to let Professor Snape have the kitten, no matter what it costs. I’ll pay for her.” Harry’s words were met with crickets chirping around them. “Like I said I can’t explain it. Not right now anyway.”

“Okay Harry. She said the kitten would be ready to leave its mum mid July.” Hagrid told him. “I’ll make sure she sends her ta Snape. Hang on. How’d you know it was a she?” Hagrid stared at Harry. “I ne’er said.”

“I’m sorry Hagrid. I can’t tell you.” Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I wish I could this is really crazy and getting even crazier.”

“I do hope you’re able to explain some day. Because this is getting annoying.” Ron said irritated but his smile dispelled any true anger. “My girlfriend having secrets and my best mate hanging out with

Snake.” He shook his red head. “I never thought it would come to that.”

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A tall handsome auburn haired teen walked resignedly after a stern straight back wizard dressed in dark brown high collared robes. After descending into the entrance hall they proceeded down the stairs leading to the dungeons.

“Professor Pleskic, Please wait.” A pretty blonde witch hurried down to them. “If you please Professor, it was not Mr. Dumbledore’s fault. It was mine.” The girls clear violet eyes filled with tears. “I beg of you. He should not be punished for my mistake.”

“Mr. Dumbledore is quite capable of speech, Miss Ammon.” A hard cold voice cracked from Pleskic. “He had ample opportunity to place the blame on the true perpetrator and failed to do so. His punishment will remain as ordered by the headmaster.” The old wizard turned and continued to the dungeons.

“Not to worry Miss Ammon.” Dumbledore bowed his head to her and followed Pleskic.

“You should return to your common room Miss Ammon, unless you would like to hear him scream.” The professor called back. The girl burst into tears and fled back up the steps.

A thick wooden door was thrust open and Dumbledore was ushered inside. To Harry's horror chains hung from the ceiling. A large man with bare chest and a black hood on his head stood slapping a short cane against his hand. The thick rod had many thin leather straps at one end and a thong wrapped around his wrist at the other.

“Remove your robes.” The hooded figure grunted. Harry could see the teen’s hands shake as he complied. The robes were tossed aside and Dumbledore was seized roughly by the hooded figure’s meaty hands and clamped into the dangling restraints. Harry felt frozen. He did not want to see this.

The setting sun cast the room with a warm glow when Harry broke his contact with Dumbledore's mind. "You were whipped?" Harry asked shakily.

"Ah well, yes." Dumbledore shrugged. "You must take into consideration Harry, it was a long time ago and such practices were quite acceptable and even expected." Harry didn't know what to say. Dumbledore gazed at him. "Harry, it was a long ago do not worry over it."

"It's just." Harry rubbed his neck. "I feel I was a bit hard on you about the Dursleys."

"How so?" Dumbledore asked.

"You grew up believing physical punishment was acceptable." Harry said. "So I understand more, why you thought my life with the Dursleys merely difficult."

"Yes, you were hard on me." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled slightly then he said. "But no, I never believed such things taught a child anything. On the contrary I felt it hindered learning, especially slower students."

"Were those punishments still in use when Tom Riddle came to Hogwarts?" Harry asked standing up. He felt at ease now in the headmaster's quarters and moved about with the familiarity of the Gryffindor common room. He strode to the window and gazed out to the darkening forest.

"I'm afraid whipping was still in use at that time." Dumbledore told him. "And a few other so call corrective punishments."

"Mrs. Weasley said once Mr. Weasley had been beaten and still had scars on his back." Harry shuddered trying to block out the thought of a nice person like Mr. Weasley getting whipped.

"Some things are worth the risk of punishment." Dumbledore said coming to stand beside him. "I'm sure you would agree." He gave Harry a quick glance and gazed out the window with a slight smile on

his face. "You have progressed with your Legilimency. Your control is much improved."

Harry glanced up at the tall wizard beside him and blushed. He knew Harry had visited Ginny in the hospital wing. Harry was sure of it. Did Dumbledore know about Snape's deal? The heat on his face deepened. Then a flash of white caught Harry's eye.

"That unicorn." Harry pointed far off into the Forbidden Forest. "I've seen him before." Harry fixed his eyes on the splash of white

"I'm afraid my old eyes can not compare to your phoenix enhanced pair." Dumbledore conjured a telescope. "Ah, yes. Hagrid commented there was a strange unicorn in the forest."

"It has been there since February." Harry said. "The first time I saw it was the night the Finnigans were killed." He continued to watch the unicorn's progress through the trees. "I was sure he knew I was looking at him."

"Interesting." Dumbledore wasn't looking into the wood anymore but at Harry.

"What is?" Harry stared back.

"Nothing more than what you said, Harry." Dumbledore chuckled. "I did not mean to sound cryptic." Harry gave the headmaster a side-long glance then turned back to the window. The unicorn was gone.

A bright flash disturbed the darkness around the lake. Harry made sure he changed back to human form before he was any where near the runespoor. "Hapa? Giza? Kesho?" Harry called softly. It wouldn't do to trip over them in the dark.

"I wanted to be sure you were warm enough." Harry saw the patch of dry land he had created. It stood out stark against the black of the grass. A rustling noise caught his ears and he strained his eyes to see into the darkness. Harry could make out a long length moving on the sandy patch. Keeping his eyes on the runespoor he knelt and felt

the gritty soil. Feeling it could be a little warmer Harry pulled out his wand and cast another heating spell on the ground.

Even though Dumbledore had given him permission to check on the runespoor, Harry still didn't want to get caught by Filch. So after getting no response from any of the serpent heads Harry quickly headed back to a place he could transform. Enjoying the night air through his feathers Harry rose a little above the lake to watch the runespoor from a safe distance as a phoenix. The runespoor looked to be rolling and twisting on the ground. A brilliant white gleamed from between two trees a few feet from the runespoor. Harry tried to call out a warning but only phoenix song echoed through the night. The unicorn tossed its head and whirled about plunging into the wood.

Without a second thought Harry followed, flying low over the canopy of the forest. In a short time he lost sight of the unicorn in the dense trees. He rose higher in the night sky peering around searching for a flash of white. He saw a flicker and flew to see but found a centaur moving through the forest. Silently Harry climbed higher again, hovering, searching. Then between two trees deep in the wood Harry saw the unicorn standing watching him, as if waiting. In an instant Harry appeared over the unicorn and followed it to a small patch of grass. The brightness of the unicorn white coat seemed to illuminate the area. A large yew tree gave Harry a place to land, well out of reach of the unicorn.

The beautiful horned head looked up at him and Harry suddenly knew this wasn't a real unicorn. Carefully moving toward the trunk of the tree, Harry made sure he had something to hang on to and changed into his human form.

"Who are you?" Harry called down. "I know you are an animagi so show yourself." The light of the unicorn disappeared to leave a ragged looking man in the shadow of the tree. His straight black hair hung to his shoulders and his clothes were old and strange looking.

"Ye be a Potter?" The man asked with a thick brogue. "Only Potters could become magical creatures so ye must be."

"My name is Harry Potter." Harry told him. "What's yours?"

"Well, I have had a number tis true." The man scratched his head as if thinking. "So many tis hard to keep track."

"I take it you are a Potter?" Harry clung to the trunk of the tree trying to see the man better. "You said only Potters could be come magical creatures."

"Aye, that I did." The man chuckled then frowned. "When am I boy? What be the year?"

Harry stared at the man and a shiver ran up his spine. "It's 1997."

The man started mumbling to himself and pacing back and forth a bit. "Why here? Why here?" Harry heard him repeat.

"Who are you?" Harry asked again.

"Eh?" The man seemed startled to see Harry there. "Beg your pardon, boy, I forget my manners at time." He bowed low. "I was cleped, Fredrick Potter. At your service."

"Fredrick Potter?" Harry started and grabbed tighter to the tree trunk. "Do I have a lot of questions for you?"

"Questions for me?" The man seemed surprised. "You've heard of me?"

"Yes, I have a book with the Potters family history and it said you just disappeared." Harry explained.

"I've got no time for questions boy." Fredrick waved his arms in agitation. "Up peril of my soul, even if I did I shouldn't tell you anything. It is too risky."

"You disappeared in time. Didn't you?" Harry ignored the gruff manner of the man. "I figured that much out."

"Aye, that I did." The man sank on to the grass looking very tired. "Lost in time." He said sadly.

"Were you a clockmaker?" Harry asked.

"Eh? Nay, never made a clock in me life." Fredrick looked insulted.

"But Professor Snape has a potion timer that has your name on it." Harry said. "Or rather the initial F then Potter."

"Snape?" Fredrick Potter jumped to his feet. "Describe this potion timer lad? And come down here, I be getting a crick in me neck looking at ye t'away up there."

"I'll come down when I think it's safe." Harry told him firmly then described the timer which sat on Snape's desk.

"It is ful fair a man to bere him evene, for al-day meteth men at unset stevene." Fredrick said.

"Uh? I didn't understand a word you said." Harry told him.

"He must be a descendent." The man muttered again to himself. "Sigeric must have found himself a woman. Of course of course he would, fine looking lad he was, bit too much nose but some ladies like that feature."

"What are you talking about? And why are you hiding in the forest as a unicorn?" Harry asked.

"It keeps me from leaving." Fredrick scowled a bit. "This 'potions timer' be there a small hour glass near with a small crystal vial?" The man tried to keep his voice calm but Harry heard fear in the question.

"Well, not with it. But I found an hourglass at the Potter family mausoleum, and my mother sent a crystal vial into the future." Harry told him.

"What!" The man shouted. "Nay say it tisnt true. Say those items are not together again."

"You better start explaining yourself." Harry said. "I'm getting tired of answering questions and not getting anything back."

"I'll not say a word till I get a better look at ye." Fredrick sat back down and folded his arms. Harry sighed and changed to the phoenix and landed in front of the ragged man. After changing back into human form he folded his legs and sat in front of Fredrick Potter.

"Those eyes." Fredrick's ruddy face paled. "Oh, stars of above what have I done?"

"Start at the beginning." Harry prodded.

"The beginning of what? There be no beginning and there be no end." The man buried his face in his hands. "It just goes on and on."

"Then tell me what happened?" Harry sighed this circle conversation was getting annoying.

"Aye I should rede to you, a Potter might understand." Fredrick took a deep breath. "I tell it you, I had a most bitid a sory care."

"A what?" Harry asked.

"A most grievous misfortune. I forget time changes speech." He shook his head thinking. "I was a recchelees young wizard. Time enthralled me. One mystery even wizard kind had yet to master. I experimented with different spells to go back in time." He leaned forward. "It's easier to go back to where you've been than to go forward into the shadows."

"The spell I used to reverse time worked satisfactory but I was not content. I wanted to be able to go forward as well. I had little success with experimental time charms so I had to invent my own." Fredrick sat back and looked at the stars peaking through the trees. "I to this day do not know why the spell went awry. I was blown through time like a feather flitting in the breeze, landing perhaps for a brief time then getting swept up into another draft to, when? I never know." Harry met the man's haunted eyes in wonder and a bit of horror.

"Aye, it be that bad lad." Fredrick nodded. "Rarely do I stay in one place long enough to even dare make a friend, too many questions would be asked. Once here." He pointed toward castle. "I taught when the mortar of the castle was still drying. I thought, I hoped..... I hoped the spell had worn off. It had been so long since I had been taken from a time period." The man looked sad and sighed.

"I thought only the founders taught at first." Harry said.

"Not even four people know everything about everything." Fredrick shook his head. "And Godrick, Rowena, Helga, and Salazar were wise enough to know their limitations. They hired the best they could find to teach the subjects they could not."

"What did you teach?" Harry asked.

"History of magic." Fredrick laughed. "Though I did have to take care and not include things that had happened after the current day and time." He gazed at Harry. "This Professor Snape you spoke of, is he your friend?"

"Hardly." Harry snorted then added quickly. "But he isn't an enemy either."

"I knew a Sigeric Snape, he too taught at Hogwarts, possibly an ancestor of your Professor Snape." The man sighed. "He was a good friend. The last friend I ever had. The only one in all time who knew I did not belong in his time. I told him the truth. And he tried to help me."

"How?" Harry asked.

"Sigeric was interested in time too. Together we thought we could master it." Fredrick sighed. "And if I had a useable device I could control my leaps in time when it happened again. We worked together on the time controller. All three components were constructed and charmed by the both of us."

"What did Sigeric teach? Potions?" Harry questioned. The man burst into a fit of laughs that sounded like a horse's whinny.

"Nay. Oh by the gods no." Fredrick whipped his eyes. "Sigeric, dear Sigeric, I loved him like a brother, but he could not brew even a drinkable tea to save his life. He taught defense."

"So you're saying this clock thing thought to be a potion timer isn't? So what exactly is it?" Harry asked.

"It sets the time of the two other devices. The timer controller worked wonderfully, except on me." Fredrick sighed. "We tested it on animals. Sigeric tested it on himself, going several hours into the future and back. But when I tried, nothing, I never moved a second in time. Which told us, I was still affected by that cursed spell. Poor Sigeric, when I finally left he had terrible trouble."

"How would you know that?" Harry asked.

"What would you do if you went to the future boy? First thing you do is see if any old friends are still about." Fredrick snapped. "I found Sigeric took the blame of my disappearance from Hogwarts. Terrible trouble, a fight broke out in the entrance hall and Sigeric..." The man cleared his throat. "Sigeric had to kill someone right there to defend himself."

"Oh the sorting hat said blood had been spilt in the castle." Harry said.

"Aye, that started the conflict between Gryffindor and Slytherin." Fredrick bowed his head.

"You said something about my eyes." Harry said. "My mother had the same color eyes."

Fredrick stared at him, and Harry could tell the man was trying to decide how much to tell him. "One time I met a wizard at a pub. Very powerful I could tell. Strange powerful if you know what I mean. He saw I had been traveling by my clothes and asked in all my travels if I had come across a runespoor of immense size. I hadn't but I had heard of such a creature." Fredrick shook himself a bit. "This wizard, Tom...no he called himself something else...I will recall it in a bit...He asked if I had any knowledge of a potion and he knew when I lied to

him and said no. I am not ashamed to say I ran. I knew I was no match for the power in this wizard and he wanted the potion I had found.”

“What potion did you have?” Harry asked.

“A very old potion lets a wizard talk to serpents.” Fredrick started when Harry gasped.

“The snake speech potion!” Harry said. “Snape, my Snape, has brewed some but we lack the muggle parselmouth’s hair for the longest time. I just found three hairs of my mother’s, Snape is going to use.”

Again Fredrick gave Harry a calculating gaze. “I could have poured the potion out. But I didn’t. Potions of such power are...well you do not just dump them on the ground, it could be dangerous.”

“I was chased from one end of the world to the other by this wizard. I kept hoping I would make a time change but no luck was with me there. One afternoon I arrived on a muggle street with this Dark Lord close on my heels.”

“Voldemort?” Harry asked unfolding his legs suddenly. “Voldemort chased you? When?”

“I don’t know when boy.” The man whined and shook his head. “I was more intent on keeping out of his reach than what year it be. On this muggle street two little girls played in the front garden. They had seen me just appear.” Fredrick paused to look into Harry’s eyes as if to help his memory. “I be not so blind that I couldn’t see the wee lass with the bright green eyes was a witch. Without really thinking why, I forced the potion down the little witch’s throat, paused long enough to modify both girls’ thoughts and as the Dark Lord apparated in the same place I left to draw him away from the girls.”

“So my mom wasn’t a muggle born parselmouth?” Harry felt his stomach sink. How were they going to get the snake speech potion working now?

"Nay, muggle born parselmouths were common long ago." Fredrick said. "But wizards were afraid of muggles with such power. Then again many pureblood wizards were afraid of muggle born witches and wizards."

"What do you mean afraid? Why would they be afraid?" Harry asked.

"Do you know a muggle born?" Fredrick asked.

"One of my best friends is a muggle born witch." Harry said.

"Can you not feel the power in her lad? Do they not teach you to feel the power anymore?" He shook his head in disbelief. "It is different than pureblood magic." Fredrick said thoughtfully. "Many times muggle blood magic is much stronger, more to the earth, more concentrated. And those pureblooded fools who think blood lines are important well, they don't like being second best to a muggle born. Half-bloods, ah, can be even more powerful than either."

"That Dark Lord that was chasing you is a half-blood." Harry said.

"I thought so though he denounced his muggle half." Fredrick nodded. "You're half blood, your mother being muggle born. I could tell even if I didn't know your mother was muggle born. You feel powerful."

"Thanks. How long have you been jumping through time?" Harry asked.

"How in the name of Emrys can I keep track of time when going through time? Think about it boy?" Fredrick said exasperated then sighed tiredly. "I feel a million years old."

"So how does the timer thing work?" Harry needed to find out that much at least.

"Simple enough, one places the time turner or time leaper in the middle of the controller then set the times on the various dials." Fredrick's eyes shot wide. "NAY! By all that you believe do not use it. Look at the mess I made."

"But it has already been used." Harry said. "My mother used it to send the time leaper into the future and I know Professor Snape returns to help her find...something. But it's hard to tell who started the time turning."

"Time is like that. Some loops are perpetual." Fredrick said then added haltingly. "Self sustaining. Independent of a beginning or end."

"How did the time turner and time leaper end up in a grave stone in the Potter mausoleum?" Harry wondered.

"When the original purpose for constructing the devices, controlling my time jumps, proved to have no affect on me, Sigeric and I discussed what to do with the items." Fredrick rubbed his neck. "It seemed a waste to destroy months of work so we decided to split the three items up. They can only be used together so alone they were safe."

"But the time turner and time leaper were in the same headstone." Harry said.

"Aye, I put them there." Fredrick smiled sadly. "Phillip and Alma Potter, my parents, I trusted to keep the time pieces safe. Aye, they were together but one Potter could not have released both devices. I charmed it in such a way that two Potters would be needed to obtain both the time turner and the time leaper. Sigeric said he would keep the time controller safe."

"Then how did my mother get the time leaper?" Harry asked almost to himself. "Snape thought she might have used my hand but if what you say is true, she couldn't have because I just got the time turner."

"It is true. Although..." Fredrick considered for a moment. "It is possible she was able to get the leaper. She married a Potter therefore she became a Potter. Perhaps things are not the same now, but in my day a lady took her husband's name legally becoming part of his family."

“Do you know anything about the little clock faces below your name on your headstone?” Harry knew instantly it wasn’t a good thing to tell someone they had a grave. “I’m sorry I didn’t think.”

“Nay think nothing of it lad.” Fredrick’s face had gone pale and he had his hand on his chest, taking deep breaths. “It must have been Sigeric who put a stone for me there.” He looked sharply at Harry. “What time did the faces read?”

“Nine, six and seven.” Harry said studying the man’s face.

“Ye say the year is 1997?” Fredrick asked thinking. “The last number could mean this year. The other two numbers the day and month.”

“So if you leap in time it would change?” Harry said in awe. “That would be a difficult spell.”

“Ah Sigeric did difficult well.” Fredrick said simply.

“You said being a unicorn keeps you from leaving?” Harry asked.

“Aye. It seems to but does little else.” Fredrick rose and started pacing. “Today’s idiotic ministry limits where unicorns can be so I can not go where I will. Nor can I talk to people, ye art the first I have spoken to in many many times.” He flopped back down to the grass looking miserable.

“I wish there was something I could do for you.” Harry said sadly. “If you came up to Hogwarts and spoke with Professor Dumbledore, he’s the headmaster now, maybe he could help you.”

“You are a kind lad.” Fredrick shook his head. “Nay, I will not risk the future again.” He paused then shook his head another time. “You remind me a bit of Sigeric. He was a kind friend. He offered me his sister for a wife, before he knew about my time difficulties.” The man sighed. “Lovely young Celia, I could not do that to her so I told Sigeric the reason why. I would not insult him by saying his sister was not acceptable blood for me.” His face changed suddenly to a scowl. “I learnt that foul varmint Albert Weasley married her. How he connived Sigeric to let Celia marry him, I have no idea.”

“Weasley? My best friend is Ron Weasley.” Harry flushed. “And my girlfriend is his sister.”

“Bright red hair?” Fredrick was still frowning at Harry’s nod but he added with a sigh. “That may be fair, if I have learned anything about time is that times and people change.”

“Why don’t you come back to talk with Snape.” Harry suggested. “You couldn’t really hurt anything talking to him.”

“I could change something by merely speaking to you!” Fredrick was on his feet again pacing. “Everything is connected.” The man stopped and swayed, slowly he turned to face Harry. Fredrick looked scared and a bit mad. “I have not long lad.” His voice shook. “It has been pleasant talking with thee. Do take care.”

“Wait. Before you go.” Harry stood and almost grabbed a hold of the man’s arm but realized if the man leapt into time that wouldn’t be a good idea. “I need to know how to activate the time controller.” The man stared at him and a soft golden glow began to shimmer at the edges of his body growing brighter as it flowed toward the center of his chest. Harry took a step back, pleading. “Please! I need to know!”

“Time to go.” Fredrick’s voice echoed as if from the end of a long corridor. The next instant he was gone.

Harry blinked at the spots in front of his eyes trying to focus in the sudden darkness. A minute later Harry stood outside the potions master's door thinking, calling on Snape at odd hours seemed to be happening way too often these days.

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Author's Notes: Wonderful reviews, thank you! They have kept me going.

As many have guessed, Time is drawing to the end of the story. I can see one or two chapters left, three at the most. Depends, on how...things...go. And how much detail I put into it.

I want to thank Chaucer for the old English of Fredrick Potter. It needed a touch of something. I hope it helped convey his different speech pattern. MSWord just said things were spelled horribly wrong!

"It is ful fair a man to bere him evene, for al-day meteth men at unset stevene."

Translation: "It is a good thing for a man to bear himself carefully, for everyday people meet in unexpected encounters."

Emrysß Merlin's name at birth.

Chapter 57

Sometime during one of Snape's thoughtful pauses Harry had fallen asleep on the potions master's couch. More surprising was the pillow his head rested on and the light blanket covering him when Harry awoke the next morning.

"Do you want a cup of tea Potter?" Snape's voice came from the table by the kitchen area.

"Please." Harry rubbed his eyes and saw the blurry outline of his glasses on the table next to the couch. He picked them up but then on. "Sorry I fell asleep Professor." Harry said as he rose and walked to the table.

"Actually, you are most tolerable when you are asleep." Snape commented without looking up from the Daily Prophet he was reading. Harry didn't say anything. He knew it was the type of thing Snape considered a joke. He slid into the empty chair Snape had pushed away from the table with his foot.

Neither spoke. It seemed like they both were waiting for the other to break the silence. Harry felt he had too much to think about to ask anymore questions. Questions for which he knew Snape had no answers.

With a rustle, Snape folded the newspaper and cleared his throat. "I am considering trying the Snake Speech potion." Harry looked sharply at him but didn't know what to say. "This Fredrick Potter did not seem to be concerned with the affects of time on the potion."

"But what if something goes wrong? My mother wasn't a muggle born parselmouth." Harry said. "What if it does something to you?"

The cold black eyes gazed at Harry in contempt. "Being a potions master, Potter I have considered that possibility." Snape said critically. "If you had taken N.E.W.T. Potions you would be learning to predict the affects of an unknown mixture."

“So what do you think it will do?” Harry had felt his cheeks burn but return the stare without flinching.

“I believe it will work but only temporary.” Snape said. “Your mother was muggle born and the hairs were taken when she was a parselmouth therefore the potion should work.”

“But what if it wears off?” Harry questioned. “You won’t be able to talk with the runespoor when you see my mother.” He felt a dull twinge in his chest when he said those words.

“I would take a couple vials of nearly completed potion with me. Your mother can provide the needed ingredients to finish the mixture.” Snape said.

For a long moment Harry stared at Snape. By the way Snape smirked, Harry knew the man was giving him time to figure something out, but what? “Her hair!” Harry blurted out. “She cut her hair for the potion.”

“That is the final reason I would risk taking the potion.” Snape gave a slight nod. “Why would she? Through all the years at Hogwarts your mother’s hair was always the same length.” Snape’s sharp face softened slightly then his harsh mask returned so quickly Harry thought he had imagined it. “She looked ridiculous with short hair so the only reason would be the Snake Speech potion.” Snape finished with a snap.

The pressure on Harry’s heart increased. “Even so.” He fought hard to control of his emotions in front of Snape. “It seems the potion will be limited to the amount of hair you bring back.” Harry swallowed. “So you better wait until the runespoor is done shedding her skin. Unless you have a snake you can try to talk to.”

“Yes.” Snape paused in his sip of tea. “I believe I will wait to speak to the runespoor.” He took a drink gazing at Harry over the rim of the cup. “Does your scar hurt?”

Quickly Harry dropped his hand from his forehead as if caught in the act of doing something wrong. “A bit. Started the other night.” Then Harry added. “Professor Dumbledore knows.”

Snape gazed at his teacup he had returned to its saucer. "The headmaster and I have discussed how occlumency might be altered to help you deal with the pain you feel when the Dark Lord is active or near you." Snape hesitated still not looking at him. "We believe meditation to clear your mind is the first task you should try." For a long time Harry stared at his hands.

"Are you willing to try?" Snape asked his voice indifferent.

"I don't know." Harry sighed letting out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. "The trouble is..." He stopped not wanting to be told again how undisciplined he was.

"What is the problem Potter?" Snape prodded. "Only you experience this so I do need your thoughts on the matter to understand and help contrive a solution."

It would have been easier telling Dumbledore but Snape was at least being civil. "I can't meditate all the time so what good is it. Voldemort." Snape flinched but didn't say a word. "Isn't going to wait until I meditate to pressure me."

"The exercise will teach you discipline and control." Snape explained. "And when done properly the control will continue during those times when you need to call on it."

"I suppose that makes sense." Harry rose. "I better get my books and go to breakfast. I'll... consider what you said Professor."

"And I will consider long over what you have told me Potter." Snape inclined his head to him then Harry left the potions master's quarters, appearing a moment later in the boys' dorm.

"I was wondered where you were." Ron said as Harry hurriedly changed clothes and grabbed his school bag. "Chumming with Snape again?" Ron said it in a way that made Harry look hard his friend.

"I promise Ron. I will tell you everything someday." Harry said. "I'll tell you the same thing I told Dumbledore." Ron's eyes widened. "We

have learned something about the time leaper but saying more could cause big problems.” Harry said then added. “Time changes.”

“Oh.” Ron’s voice had a guilty squeak to it. “Sorry. I didn’t mean ...”

“Forget it.” Harry snorted. “Believe me. It’s just as weird for me to hang out with Snape.” Harry and Ron walked down to the spiral stairs to the common room.

“What is Hermione up to anyway?” Harry asked as they proceeded to the great hall. Both Hermione and Ginny had told their respective boyfriends if they wanted to have breakfast with them they would have to get up early for the duration of the final exams and O.W.L.s.

“I dunno.” Ron shrugged. “She won’t tell me. Something good. That’s all she’ll say.”

“I thought maybe Hermione had learned she was head girl for next year.” Harry said.

“I thought so too but she said no.” Ron grinned then gave smirk. “So we’ll just have to put up with Hermione knowing something we don’t.” Harry laughed and Ron joined in as they entered the great hall.

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The memory of Snape’s interrogation followed Harry through the next week. Snape hadn’t been scornful or disdainful about his story but the intensity of his questioning made Harry realize the seriousness of his encounter with Fredrick Potter. It took many retellings of the story but Harry thought Snape really believed Fredrick Potter was who he said he was. The haunted look in the man’s eyes had been enough to convince Harry.

That hardest thing was not being able to tell Ron, Hermione or Ginny. Several times Harry had to catch himself from saying something about Fredrick Potter. He couldn’t even ask Dumbledore about why only Potters could become magical creatures. He had mentioned it to Snape, carefully, since the history of the Potters wasn’t Snape’s favorite subject. Harry couldn’t understand why his father hadn’t been

a magical creature. Snape's eyes smoldered as he told Harry, stags are in many magical stories, especially a white stag. Harry hadn't considered what color of stag his father had been. His stag patronus of course was silvery white. Could his dad have been a white stag? He would have to ask Remus.

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On Friday the last day of all exams, Harry and Ron sat by the lake, the runespoor curled around Harry as he admired her shinny new scales.

"Do you think she would mind if I touched her?" Ron asked. A slight hissing came from the center head.

"Kesho wants to know why?" Harry smiled.

"She's beautiful. I'm kind of partial to orange." Ron said then looked a bit alarmed as Kesho slithered under his hand. "Uh, hi." Ron ran his hand down the broad head and neck.

"She wants to know if you like the black stripes too." Harry grinned. "She does feel nice doesn't she? I don't know why people are afraid of snakes...uh serpents. They feel cool." He glanced at the heads in his lap to see if they had caught his slip. Hapa and Giza seemed too content after eating the fresh rats Harry had brought them to have noticed.

"Yeah." Ron ran a finger across the black markings. "Like I said she's stunning." He sighed and leaned back against a rock. "I'm glad I don't have anymore exams. Hermione's got both Arithmancy and Ancient Runes today."

"Ginny has History of Magic." Harry's face drained of color.

"It wasn't your fault Harry." Ron said firmly.

"I..." Harry shook his head and stroked the runespoor more then stopped abruptly. "It's hard to believe it's been a year." He couldn't stop the tears. With quick wipe of his cheeks Harry glanced at Ron to

see if he had notice. Ron gazed back unashamed with a few tears running down his face.

"I miss him too." Ron said simply. "The summer we did all the cleaning of headquarters, he pumped me all the time for information about you. So I got to know him pretty well."

"You probably knew him better than I did." Harry tried not to feel bitter.

"It doesn't matter." Ron said. "It's you he cared about. I think the only thing he cared about."

Swallowing hard Harry failed to fight back more tears. Strange how they could sit and talk about someone without mentioning his name. The loops of runespoor around him gave him a gentle reassuring squeeze.

A slight smile played over Harry's face as the memory of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle being squeezed breathless in the same powerful coils replaced his thoughts of Sirius. The three Slytherins had tried to steal the skin the runespoor had shed. The long length of dry scales was now safely in Snape's quarters under powerful spell locks. Price as yet to be determined by Harry much to Snape's dismay.

They sat without speaking for a long while. Birds twittered noisily around them and a frog croaked along the bank. Several butterflies flittered in a loose cluster above the wild flowers around the lake. Harry mind wandered as the sent of violets blew his way. It reminded him of Ginny. A silent snort echoed in his thoughts. Everything seemed to remind him of Ginny. Ron's voice brought his attention crashing to earth.

"So when does Snape go back in time?" Ron asked as casually as if they were talking about quidditch. At Harry's look of shock Ron smirked at him. "It wasn't that hard to figure out Harry. I did it all myself. Hermione didn't have to clue me in once."

"I don't think we should talk about it." Harry looked around nervously. "Why didn't you tell me you knew?"

"We are quite alone." Hapa hissed.

"You seemed determined to keep quiet about it." Ron glanced around too. "So, Hermione and I agreed that an overheard word could change everything and it was best if we kept our mouths shut, even among just the two of us. To tell you the truth Harry, the last thing I want to talk about when I'm totally alone with Hermione, is you and Snape."

Harry laughed and then sighed. "What tipped you off?"

"I think the clincher was the black and white kitten and you insisting Snape get her." Ron said looking up at the puffy white clouds. "Now who do we know that is black and white, has already traveled in time and happens to be a cat?"

"Alright it is Cleo but I can't tell you anything more. I wish I could tell you all about it Ron, but I can't." Harry said miserably.

"Don't beat yourself up about it." Ron said laughing. "I'm just giving you a hard time."

"So how are you and Hermione getting along?" Harry eyed Ron. "Where are you snogging now? I haven't caught you in the common room for while."

The questions had the effect Harry had wanted. Ron's ears went red but a smile played over the freckled face as he absentmindedly stroke Kesho's head and neck. "Ah, now if I told you I'd have to modify your memory so you wouldn't think of taking my sister there."

"No problem. We already have a place of our own." Harry said casually, holding in a laugh at the way Ron's ears became redder.

"Where?" Ron asked his eyes narrowed. "It can't be the room of requirement. Everyone knows about that now."

"No. It's not the room of requirement." Harry smiled. "I think it's best if you don't know. I don't want to be in the middle of something and have you come barging in."

Ron's mouth dropped open but snapped shut when Harry laughed. "Alright, you have your place and Hermione and I have ours." He sighed. "Can't say we've seen it much with exams and all but tomorrow after the dance..." Ron stretched and grinned again. "Hermione's all mine. No test to think about, no homework...just us."

Dropping his gaze to his hand stroking Hapa's neck, Harry couldn't find the courage to ask Ron how far he and Hermione had gone. Two emotions played back and forth in his mind. Harry was dieing to know if Ron and Hermione had 'done it', and how 'doing it' was. But he too was looking forward to spending time with Ginny alone. And even though he and Ginny hadn't done anything more than kiss, Harry felt awkward discussing it with Ron.

"We haven't." Ron said quietly as if knowing what he had been thinking. Harry gave a sharp glance at Ron. "Hermione and me...we haven't..." His face flushed a bit. "We just didn't want to chanceI know there are spells but even those can fail or a person can forget to do them. Hermione is too smart to risk her education and her future." Ron rushed to explain.

Harry felt his face burn. He swallowed hard. "Ginny and I haven't either. We talked about it and I told her she wouldn't get any pressure from me to just do it." It was as uncomfortable as he had imagined. "I love just holding her." Harry said glancing again at Ron. His friend gave him an accepting nod. "If we decide to....you will be the very last to person know." Harry said very sincerely.

Ron glared at the quip. "You better marry her first." He warned.

"And you Hermione." Harry gave him the same stare. "But for some reason I don't think it will be up to either of us."

"Yeah, the women control everything like that don't they?" Ron gave a smirking sigh. "Ah well, maybe it's for the best."

"I would like to see both of your children." Kesho hissed. "Children are the future of everything." Ron looked at Harry for a translation.

“She wants to see our children.” Harry said half laughing. “I forgot we were being over heard by three.”

“Our children.” Ron repeated. “Now that sounds weird. Let’s graduate and get jobs before that happens.”

“Definitely.” Harry agreed, laughing suddenly he put his hand to his forehead and drew in a breath. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ron looking at him concerned. “I’m okay.” Harry said, blinking from the pain. “I don’t know what he’s up to but something really has him...” Harry searched for the word that would fit.

“Angry?” Ron supplied.

“No, more just worked up. He’s anticipating something.” Harry flinched as he gazed across the sparkling lake, the beautiful day oblivious to any force of darkness. “I’m thirsty.” Shaking off the uneasy feeling his scar gave him, Harry hissed at Hapa to release him from her coils. “Let’s go get something to drink.”

“Alright.” Ron stood up and dusted off his pants. “How about a game of chess?” They both said goodbye to the runespoor and headed back to the castle.

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With exams over, once again the evening meal was noisy and cheerful. Third years and above happily anticipating the last dance of the year the next day as they ate and chatted over their dinner. In the middle of pudding the headmaster stood up and cleared his throat. Quickly all talk died away.

“Just a small announcement.” Dumbledore smiled. “I must inform the older students, there will be no formal dance tomorrow.” An angry muttering broke out. Dumbledore held up his hands. “I think the replacement activity will bring sufficient entertainment that you will not object. But you will have to wait until tomorrow morning to find out what has taken its place.” Dumbledore nodded to the students and sat down. Instantly talk rose like a wave through the great hall.

"Do you have anything to do with this Hermione?" Harry asked because he had noticed she was the only one sitting looking very smug."

"I'll be able to tell you everything tomorrow." Hermione grinned.

"You'll tell me later tonight?" Ron looked pathetically at her and laid his head on her shoulder. "Please."

"Oh, alright." Hermione blushed when she glanced at Harry. "He is pitiful isn't he?"

"I always thought so." Harry laughed as he felt Ron trying to kick him under the table.

"I hope it doesn't start too early." Ginny yawned. "I was hoping for a lie in."

"You do look beat." Harry commented but realized too late it wasn't something a guy should say to his girlfriend. "But cute nevertheless." He added hastily.

"You're cute too." Ginny leaned over and kissed his nose, leaving a bit of chocolate mousse on the tip. "Oops. Sorry." She rubbed his nose with her finger. Her eyes met his and her smile faded. "Your scar is bothering you." Ginny said softly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were busy with O.W.L.s." Harry said but Ginny glared at him. "And Ron still won't let me keep you in the dorm at night." Harry smiled.

"You're too right about that." Ron said glaring at the two of them but Harry saw the smile under the scowl.

"Well, later you can lie with your head in my lap and I'll sooth your scar before you go to bed." Ginny drew out the word sooth so Harry caught the meaning. He grinned at her.

"I like that idea." Harry pushed his dessert away even though he was only half done with his second piece of pie. "When can we start?"

Hermione and Ginny went into giggles as Ron sat red faced but tightlipped as if determined not to say a word.

“What? I didn’t say anything.” Ron protested then smirked. “I imagine there’s going to be a lot of soothing going on tonight. Hermione and I will probably be on sooth patrol.”

“Or doing some soothing of your own.” Ginny smirked back. “You forget Ron, I’m a Prefect too. I know where the older prefects hide out.” Ron’s mouth dropped open. “Come on Harry, we can get a head start.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him from the bench. Laughing Harry let Ginny lead him out of the hall.

Whatever power Ginny had in her touch, made Harry very comfortable and drowsy. With his head in her lap and one of her hand on his scar, she stroked and frequently kissed away any irritation, making every muscle in Harry body melt into a tranquil state.

Evidently Ginny didn’t want to disturb him after he had fallen asleep because when Harry roused, barely opening his eyes, he could see she slept, her gentle breathing adding to his feeling of happiness and well being. Too contented to move Harry snuggled against her and closed his eyes again.

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“Hey wake up!” A voice shouted from the dormitories above. “Look outside!” Excited voices radiated from all the rooms, both boys and girls dorms. Harry felt a soft touch on his cheek and a light kiss on his nose.

“Wake up sleepy head.” Ginny said. “I don’t know what’s up but I want to go see.” Harry sat up smiling at her, making her flush. She pushed at him. “Come on, up!”

Harry grabbed her hand and they ran to the common room window. “Wow.”

“I don’t believe it!” Ginny clapped. “Look over there!” She pointed to the left. Harry threw open the window and they leaned out. Tents of

every color of the rainbow dotted the Hogwarts grounds. A large Ferris wheel turned slowly amid a shower of fireworks.

"Look over there." A boy from the first year dorm window shouted. Harry glanced up every window was filled with students hanging out, craning their bodies to look.

"Harry! Get up here and get changed." Ron waved at him.

"Be right up." Harry yelled back and drew back inside the window. "I'll meet you back down here in five minutes."

"Make that fifteen." Ginny called as she ran to the girls' stairs.

Twenty minutes later Hermione and Ron sat looking quite smug as Harry and Ginny tried to pry some answers out of them at the Gryffindor table in the great hall.

"You'll just have to wait a few minutes more." Hermione said over the loud babble in the hall. "Dumbledore will be making an announcement soon I expect. There he is now." She said with relief.

Dumbledore dressed in a plain pale yellow robe strode to his center seat. Neighbor nudged neighbor and a shushing sound move around the hall. "Good morning! As I'm sure all of you have now seen our secret. A carnival for all Hogwarts students will replace the Hogsmeade visit, ending this evening with an informal dance for third year and above."

A loud cheer echoed around the hall. Eager students exchanged excited words. Dumbledore cleared his throats and the talk died down. "The activities will begin at noon. School robes are not mandatory. Many of your favorite shops from Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade are here today." He paused for a cheer from the students. "Along with many games and activities for your amusement."

"The teacher dunking booth's proceeds will go to help families affected by the Death Eaters attacks." His face sobered then said brightly. "So if you do not succeed in dunking your um...favorite teacher the first time...please, do try again, as it is for a good cause."

Almost everyone in Harry's ear shot muttered something about drowning Snape.

Dumbledore turned his gaze towards them and held out a hand to indicate the table. "You have Gryffindor Prefect Hermione Granger to thank for this excellent idea. So do be generous with your gratitude when you see her today. I think that is all." Dumbledore sat down and the rush of talk broke out again.

"How were you able to keep this quiet Hermione?" Harry asked as he buttered a slice of toast.

"It wasn't easy. But if word got out Dumbledore said he would have to cancel it." Hermione said seriously. "He didn't contact any of the vendors until this morning. So there wouldn't be time for anyone to switch people and bring in something dangerous."

Her words had a sobering affect on Harry and Ginny. "I never considered anything like that." Ginny sighed.

"It should be perfectly safe." Hermione said. "Dumbledore asked only people he knew for sure where they stand."

"I know this is a stupid question but is a wizard carnival different from muggle's? Not that I would know what that was like but I have seen photos and bits of them on television." Harry asked then took a sip of juice. His question sobered Hermione and Ginny to the point of tears forming in their eyes. "Ah, come on. I didn't mean for you to get all misty on me." He felt the heat rise in his face. "I was just asking a question."

"Actually I think you do say stuff like that to get their sympathy." Ron quipped. "Seems to work pretty well. Maybe I should take on a poor deprived boy persona." He pulled at his hair so it stood up like Harry's. "I've never been to a carnival. Nice lady, will you take me please!" Ron laid his head on Hermione's shoulder.

Seeing Harry laugh made Hermione smile. "You are quite pathetic at times Harry." She ignored Ron who continued to make sad faces on her shoulder. "But that's why we love you."

“Hey!” Ron lifted his head protesting. “You’re only supposed to tell me that.”

Hermione turned to her boyfriend and surveyed him critically. “I don’t know why I love you but I do so calm down.” She looked at Harry. “I think it’s better for you to judge for yourself.”

“I don’t really know what a muggle carnival is like.” Ginny said ignoring her brother all together. “But this is going to be fun. It’s such a fantastic idea Hermione. How did you come up with it?”

“Thanks Ginny.” Hermione flushed. “The formal dances are fun but with the nice weather I thought everyone would enjoy something outside.”

Slowly twelve o’clock arrived. A fan fare of trumpets and carnival music rose from all the tents announcing the opening. The students of Hogwarts poured out of the castle and down the stone steps, pointing this way and that trying to decide what to try first.

Harry had changed into jeans and a white t-shirt. The only causal things he had that fit him. Ginny also wore jeans and a blue spotted blouse with short sleeves, her red hair tied back loosely with a matching scarf. Ron wore a pair of kaki trousers with a gold striped t-shirt. Hermione had on a sun dress of green with white piping along the edges.

Holding Ginny’s hand, Harry along with Ron and Hermione joined the mob of students heading for the first tents. A green striped cart stood next to a solid green canvas. Harry read the sign. ‘Wish Wispy Web.... Wish the flavor of your next bite!’ A cheery very plump wizard was handing out what looked to Harry different colored candy floss.

“Mmmm Marmalade!” Harry saw Dennis Creevey and his older brother Colin tasting the confection. “Now it’s strawberry! Outstanding.”

“Let’s get some.” Harry said turning Ginny.

“Okay but just one. We can share.” Ginny suggested.

“I have it covered.” Harry said handing coins to the vender.

“Yeah, but I want to save room for other stuff too.” Ginny said taking the Wish Wispy Web the wizard handed her.

“Do’n worry miss. Ya cun et this all day and not fill up.” He touched his floppy hat and a bit of candy floss stuck to it.

“Thanks Harry, Lemon lime.” Hermione smiled at her first bite of wish wispy web. “This is good.”

“I wonder if it can do trout?” Ron said the next moment he spat out a bite on the grass. “I guess it can.” He wiped his mouth. “I wish for anything to get that taste out of my mouth.” He took a tentative nibble. “Ah, that’s better, peppermint.”

They stood looking around and changing flavors until the wish wispy webs were all gone. Then they proceeded along the rows of tents and booths. A group of five tiny witches and wizards were putting on a puppet show in a booth next to a blue spotted tent. A squeaky voice made Harry look harder at the puppeteers.

“There’s Professor Flitwick.” Hermione said. “They must be relatives of his.” The family resemblance was obvious. They stood and watched the puppets, with no strings, attached dance and caper around the stage.

“Floreat Fortescue’s Ice cream. I haven’t had one of their sundaes for ages.” Harry pointed.

“I’m hungry for something more than ice cream.” Ron said and stuck his nose in the air. “I smell pizza!” He turned his head in the direction of the scent. “That way. Come on my treat!” They allowed Ron to lead them away.

“Look at the roller coaster!” Ginny said as the tracks rose above the trees of the forbidden forest. “It looks like the Hogwarts Express. Oh!” They all started when the cars left the track and leapt a large gap in

the rails, landing safely on the other side. "I should have known." She laughed.

"Let's go on it after pizza." Harry grinned.

"I don't know. Just after eating?" Hermione eyed the roller coaster nervously. Ron put an arm across her shoulders.

"You can hang on to me love." Ron kissed her cheek.

"And if you scream like a girl then what can she do?" Ginny snickered.

"Then I'll just have to hang on to her." Ron said unruffled by his sister's teasing. "What do you want on the pizza?"

After they ate the four continued to explore the carnival. Stopping to play a game of gnomes toss in which Ron won Hermione a large stuffed unicorn and Harry managed to win a small stuffed owl for Ginny.

As they continued to walk through the tents Harry noticed he was being stared at by a lot of younger students. Glancing down at his white t-shirt after the last intent gaze by two second year girls, he finally asked. "Do I have something on my face? Everyone's been staring at me." Harry felt his face heat up when Ron and Hermione exchanged looks, rolling their eyes. Ginny sighed and threaded her fingers through his.

"Not everybody is looking at you Harry, just the girls." Ginny ran her hand across his chest. "Your little tight t-shirt is giving them all heart palpitations."

"They...I...why?" Harry sputtered feeling his face grow hotter. "You're not serious." Harry frowned. Ron and Hermione started laughing. "Shut it you two."

"It's a good thing you don't know you're gorgeous." Ginny said her eyes flashing. "Or I would have to hex some of them."

"You really have filled out this year Harry." Hermione grinned. "You should hear the talk in the loo."

"Oh great, like I need more focus on me." Harry grumbled still feeling hot in the face.

"Ah that's the price we must pay for our good looks." Ron quipped. "Just the other day I had to beat a couple off with a stick."

"Look at that." Ginny pointed toward the lake. A sign with a large red heart flashed. 'Tunnel of Love'. "Let's try it." She grinned at Ron.

"Alright." Harry took her hand without giving Ron a second glance and headed toward the ride.

"Wait." Ron ran up beside them pulling Hermione with him. "Let Hermione and I go in first. I don't want to see you two doing anything."

"Fine with me. I've caught you two snogging enough I'm used to it." Harry said without cracking a smile. Ginny giggled into his arm as they approached a dock on the lake. Harry's mouth dropped open. Each boat, shaped like a sleigh, was being pulled by a single swan the size of a large pony. Ginny tugged on his hand and they entered the queue behind Ron and Hermione.

When an empty boat glided along the dock and stopped, Ron and Hermione stepped in and sat down. Hermione leaned back as Ron draped an arm around her shoulders. The black swan pulling the boat hissed a bit and started forward into a tunnel along the lake's edge. Harry glanced at Ginny, grinning and her face flushed as a white swan pulled another boat along side the pier. Holding her hand Harry let Ginny step in first then he stepped on to the skiff. Copying Ron, Harry leaned back holding up an arm so Ginny could cuddle against him. With Ginny's head on his shoulder Harry watched the swan silently pull them into the tunnel.

At first all was black around them. Harry felt Ginny hold her breath. The next moment the boat was a gondola being pulled through Venice's waterways. Romantic music piped along the course as they

scene slowly changed to Seine and the Eiffel tower rose in the distance. Just catching a glimpse of pyramids as the scene changed, Harry felt Ginny's hand pull his head down for a kiss. After which Harry couldn't have told anyone where the little boat went from there. He pulled Ginny close and felt her sighing breath now as he ran a hand down her back. Her blouse had pulled up and his hand touched a small bit of Ginny's skin on her back.

"OUCH." Harry yelped and let go of Ginny immediately.

"What's wrong?" Ginny looked a little dazed.

"My hand. It was like I got an electric shock when I touched your skin." Harry tried to examine his fingers in the dim light. "I'm alright. It just surprised me."

"I didn't feel anything." Ginny said then flushed. "Not anything that hurt." She giggled then wrapped her arms around Harry's neck again. "Where were we? Or are you too hurt to continue?"

"I always finish what I start." Harry carefully put his arms around her waist and pulled her close. All went well until Ginny placed a causal hand on his hip. Harry yelled again. "What is going on? Is this a tunnel of love or a Torture tunnel?"

"I think I know." Ginny pulled him back to her and cuddled against his side again. "Mom told me about a Tunnel of Love her and Dad went on once. It had guards to limit how far the snogging can go." She clasped his one hand in hers. "You can hold hands and kiss but touching any other flesh below the neck you getwell a punishment." Ginny giggled.

"But you didn't touch my skin on my hip." Harry protested.

"I wasn't finished. Touching anything below the waist has the same results." Ginny giggled again. "I hope it didn't hurt anything important."

"Why did I get shocked again? You're the one who did the touching?" Harry felt Ginny snicker. "Oh, you liked me getting zapped?"

"No, but it is funny." Ginny squealed as Harry tickled her. "Stop that. I think it is an old fashion thing of male needing more control over their hormones. That sort of thing."

Carefully Harry pulled Ginny into his arms, kissing her deeply while in the back of his mind he kept control of his hands, making sure they stayed on her waist, insulated by her blouse. It was very difficult. Ginny melted against him and twice more made him yell in pain as her hands wandered.

"Hey you two, knock it off. The ride is over." Ron's voice made Harry jerk his head up breaking the very nice kiss he and Ginny had been working on. The boat had stopped without the two of them realizing it. Standing up Harry held out a hand and pulled Ginny to her feet then hand in hand they stepped on to the dock.

"What's wrong with your hands Ron?" Ginny asked then Harry noticed his best friend had his hands behind his back.

"Nothing." Ron flushed red and nodded toward the shore of the lake. "Look, they roped off the runespoor. That's a good idea." Harry wondered how Hermione could stand there and not explode from holding in laughter like that.

"Let's see them mate." Harry grabbed Ron's arm and pulled his hand to the front. From the tip to the first joint Ron's fingers were black. "What did you touch Ron?" Harry gave a sly look at Hermione. "Or should I ask what were you touching Hermione? Ginny couldn't keep her hands off me either." Hermione went into a hysterical fit of laughing.

Jerking his hand away from Harry, Ron muttered. "They should warn people about that before they go in."

"Let's go on the roller coaster then get some ice cream." Harry suggested.

“To tell you the truth.” Hermione eyed the roller coaster in the distant. “I really don’t want to ride that thing. I never did like them. Why don’t you go with Ginny? Ron and I can look through the shops.”

“Okay, see you in a bit.” Harry said then turned to Ginny. “You do want to ride it don’t you?”

“Well, to tell you the truth...I’d rather go on the carrousel or the Ferris wheel.” Ginny pointed to the rides. “But if you really want to, I’ll go with you.”

“That’s okay.” Harry put his arm around her and kissed her temple. “Since I haven’t been on either it will be fun, especially being on them with you.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet.” Ginny gushed ignoring her brother rolling his eyes as she kissed Harry.

“The carrousel sounds like fun. Let’s do that.” Hermione took Ron’s hand gently. “Do your fingers hurt?”

“Here.” Ginny pulled away from Harry and took her brother’s hands in hers. She held each finger tip for a moment and the blackened tip disappeared. “Better?”

“Much better. Thanks Ginny.” Ron said. “Off to the carrousel?” He gave his hand back to Hermione. The four set off through the crowd toward the ride. Harry heard music and saw a large gazebo in the middle of everything with a band playing a calypso tune.

“What the?” Harry did a double take as two second year Ravenclaw boys passed with long silvery white hair and beard like Dumbledore’s mane. Then he froze walking toward him were images of himself. The Creevey brothers had his black hair that stuck up in the back and round glasses just like his.

“That’s different.” Ron smirked. “Must be a trend.”

"This has the distinct mark of two people." Hermione eyed a seventh year Gryffindor who walked by with Hagrid's thick wiry tangle of beard and hair.

"Fred and George." Ginny said immediately. She looked around and pointed. "There they are." A narrow two story tent with broad red stripes had a cluster of people around an outside table. A burst of laughter issued from the crowd as Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione approached. Two more boys walked through the parting crowd with Harry's look. Fred had just taken a hat off of a first year Hufflepuff boy while Lee Gordon the twins best friend was busy taking money from a Ravenclaw fourth year. George was bringing out a couple of large boxes from the tent.

"Fred, George." Harry called trying to keep the anger from swelling in him.

"Harry!" Fred grinned at him. "Just the man I wanted to see." The twin pulled Harry by the arm and put him beside the first year. "Look! Identical down to the last cowlick." Fred told the crowd.

"Fred!" Harry pulled away and glared at him. "I need to talk to you two. Now!"

"Uh, right. Lee, take over for a bit." Fred motioned for them to follow George into the tent.

"What's up Harry?" George asked with feigned innocent that fooled no one.

"These hats. Where do you get off..." Harry's temper started to boil.

"Now don't get hot under the collar Harry. It's all in good fun." Fred patted him on the back. "You aren't the only one we have. Besides the Harry Hats, we have Dumbledore Dos, Hagrid Hair and Weasley Wigs. We also have Slytherin Slime but that doesn't seem to be selling well."

"I think it's kind of cute." Ginny smiled but straightened her face when Harry glared at her then she giggled. "Sorry." She tried to hold it in

but started snickering again. Ron and Hermione were doing better containing their laughter but they both had big grins on their faces that they weren't doing anything to hide. Seeing Ginny laughing made Harry smile. He couldn't be angry if she was happy.

"Alright you can use my name." Harry sighed resignedly to Fred and George. Then an idea came to him. "But...all proceeds go to the teacher's dunking booth fund." The twins' mouths dropped open for a second and they nodded.

"Fair enough." George conceded. "People are really disappointed Snape didn't show up for it so it hasn't been doing as well as they had hoped."

"You're chummy with Snape now Harry." Ron poked his arm. "Why don't you talk to him into getting on the dunking machine?"

"Maybe I will." Harry said still eyeing the hats. "Just don't over do the hero stuff okay?" He glanced at Fred and George.

"Actually Dumbledore's hair is the favorite." George said evasively.

"But Harry's Hats do run a close second." Fred looked relieved Harry wasn't going to make them stop using his name. "We didn't have much time to get things around this morning."

"And getting your permission seemed to be a little low on the list." George said sheepishly. "Dumbledore and Hagrid were over the moon about with them."

"Maybe I should try a Weasley Wig." Harry said picking up a tall hat with stars from a stack of them in a box.

"No." Ginny grabbed his hand and tugged the hat away from him. "It would be like kissing one of my brothers." Fred and George eyed him for a moment. A slow grin spread across Harry's face at the pair struck silent.

"Yes, Fred, George, I do kiss your sister." Harry confessed with his hand on his heart. "She quite good..."

“Stop!” In identical movements Fred and George both covered their ears. “We’ve heard enough.”

“We were on our way to the carrousel.” Hermione reminded them.

“Oh, yeah.” Harry said still grinning at Fred and George, he took Ginny’s hand. “After the Tunnel of Love the carrousel will be pretty tame.” He shot back at the twins as they left the tent, wondering what horrible thing they would do to get back at him for his cheek.

Pausing now and then to look into a tent the four made their way to the carrousel. As the music from the roundabout grew louder Harry had a strange feeling settle in his stomach. But momentarily he forgot it when the carrousel came into view. All the animals on the carrousel were alive!

A zebra cantered between a lion and elephant while a rhino lumbered along snorting. Harry saw a kangaroo start bouncing between a giraffe and tiger as their riders laughed and tried to slap hands with the rider of an ostrich as it strode by them. Then the tune of the carrousel changed and the chill settled in Harry’s chest as they approached. The coldness turned to a warmth that spread throughout his whole body. Taking deep breaths Harry blinked hard and froze in his tracks.

“Harry?” Hermione asked worried. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t know.” Harry swallowed. A strange feeling came over him as he watched the carrousel turn and heard the music. A fleeting image passed through his mind and Harry rubbed the back of his neck then looked at them in awe.

“I remember my parents.” He choked and cleared his throat, looking in wonder at Hermione, Ron and Ginny. “On the carrousel, I rode a hippo and my dad stood beside me while I waved at my mum as I went by.” Tears stood in his eyes as Harry looked behind him. “A zebra behind me sneezed and I felt the drops hit my neck.” Ginny put her arm around his waist and he leaned against her a bit. “I never remembered anything good before, not on my own.”

“That’s wonderful Harry.” Hermione said blinking hard. “You must have been to a carnival before they were killed.”

“Yeah.” Harry took a deep breath. “Let’s go for a ride, my treat.” He grinned broadly his eyes shining brightly.

“I get the camel.” Ron said.

“I want the tiger.” Ginny pointed to the striped cat next to the hippo now. Harry squeezed her waist then looked at Hermione as he paid for their tickets. “Well?”

“I think I’ll ride the giraffe.” Hermione said.

Astride the broad hippo’s back Harry regretted his choice of animals. The feel of the animal’s thick skin combined with the music deepened the memory of his parents. A good memory but tears leaked out of his eyes as he could almost feel his dad’s hand on his leg. He could see Ginny trying to catch his eyes but Harry kept his gaze focused on the twitching ears of the hippo. Shortly familiar arms wrapped around his waist. Ginny had gotten on behind him. Through his tears Harry smiled, her hug chasing away the sad sense of loss and filling the emptiness with a feeling of warmth and happiness.

On their way to Florean Fortescue’s Ice cream after the carrousel ride they saw the teacher dunking booth. A huge clear cauldron, the size of a swimming pool, stood to the front of the booth. Inside the cauldron was a foul smelling yellowish liquid. Off to the right a target zigzagged back and forth as Dean Thomas tried to hit it with a stunning spell.

“Really Mr. Thomas, you’re aim is atrocious.” The voice from the teacher floating above the cauldron in a comfortable chair was, Professor McGonagall! Harry gaped. His mentor looked nothing like the stiff transfiguration teacher he knew. She had on an old fashion striped swimsuit, which covered her from neck to toe. On her head sat a frilly matching hat and her hair was loose around her shoulders. To complete the look she held a parasol and twirled it as she taunted the next shooter.

“McMillan do you have both your eyes closed?” Evidently Professor McGonagall spotted Harry. “Don’t you dare try Potter.”

“Is that a challenge Professor?” Harry asked innocently. But McGonagall didn’t get a chance to answer for Ernie McMillan had hit the target and her chair plunged McGonagall into the stink sap. A roar of laughter and applause came from the watching crowd. The chair rose slowly out of the cauldron with McGonagall sputtering and coughing but with a wave of her wand she was clean and dry again.

Really Harry didn’t want to try to put Professor McGonagall into the stink sap. Though they stayed and watched a couple more students accomplish the deed. Harry noticed the target moved according to the skill level of the shooter. For first years it never changed directions abruptly and would often remain in one place for a time. When a seventh year Slytherin tried, the target zipped around so fast the red glow it emitted left a streak in the air. Before they left to get ice cream Harry heard again a lot of muttering wishing Snape was on the chair.

At Florean Fortescue’s Ice cream they all ordered large sundaes. Ron surprised Harry by insisting on treating again.

“With only the two of us in school, Mom and Dad have been able to give us a bit more pocket money.” Ron told him. “And I owe you.”

The ice cream tasted as good as it had almost four years ago. Harry thought about how so much had changed since he had stayed at the Leaky Cauldron as he mixed marshmallow, strawberry topping, chopped and double chocolate ice cream together for a large bite. So many high and lows he sighed, idly watching the crowd walk by.

The tall form of Dumbledore came into view striding slowly towards them along the tents on the other side from where Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were sitting. Then Harry saw Snape beside the headmaster. From where Harry sat he could tell the potion teacher was not happy with the merriment around him. Repeatedly, Snape shook his head at what ever Dumbledore was saying and his scowl deepened.

The headmaster laughed at the students passing with his hair. And as he pointed to a few with Hagrid's tangle Dumbledore saw Harry. He touched Snape's arm and strode purposely toward them. Snape reluctantly followed.

"Hello, enjoying yourselves I see." Dumbledore smiled. "Excellent. I hope you have thanked Hermione sufficiently."

"I know Ron has." Harry said watching the color rise in Ron's and Hermione's faces.

"Wonderful!" Dumbledore said enthusiastically. "I have asked Professor Snape to watch over the runespoor, Harry. I have put a protective barrier around her but since Professor Snape refuses to participate in the dunking booth I thought a little added protection would be good."

"Why won't you go on the dunking stool Professor?" Harry asked. He heard Ginny Hermione and Ron all take in a quick breath. Snape looked like he already had drunk a gallon of stink sap.

"I do not recall being required to report my reasons to you Potter." Snape snarled.

"I'll do it if you will." Harry held in a laugh as he saw Dumbledore eyes twinkle brightly.

"What do you mean Potter?" Snape's eyes narrowed.

"How about something like a challenge? Who can raise the most money for the booth?" Harry said almost losing it when he saw the expressions on his friends' faces. "We each do an hour and the loser has to do something for the winner."

"Like what?" Snape asked suspiciously.

"Oh, I don't know. Anything." Harry shrugged knowing full well how much Snape wanted the runespoor skin. Even though he knew it was worth a lot of galleons this was too much fun to pass up.

“Anything?” Snape repeated dangerously and Harry gave a short nod. Snape glared at him for a long moment. “Very well, Potter. The last two hours of the booth’s time will be ours. You will go first.” He said sharply.

“Great. That will give us time to spread the news.” Harry said amazed at his own ability not to burst out laughing.

“Wonderful Severus.” Dumbledore patted Snape on the shoulder. “Say that ice cream does look tasty.” The potion master closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths as if trying not to shout at the headmaster.

“I think I will pass on the ice cream Headmaster.” Snape said as polite as he could manage. “I will see to the runespoor.” With a swish of his robes Snape strode off.

“Oh, my.” Dumbledore sank into a chair beside Ron, took off his half-moon glasses and wiped his eyes. “It can not be healthy to hold in laughter like that.” He chuckled then gave deep sigh. “I have tried all morning to convince Professor Snape to participate in the carnival.”

“Well, it is the Slytherin way.” Hermione pointed out. “Something had to be in it for him.”

“Ah yes.” Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. “How true that is Hermione. One must not forget the nature of a person.” A tiny old witch brought Dumbledore a small lemon cone without him even asking. “Thank you Tonks.”

“How’d ya know it was me?” The witch asked sounding a little insulted.

“You feel like Nymphadora Tonks and you can not change that now matter how you change your appearance.” Dumbledore said, licking at his ice cream.

“Only you would feel that.” Tonks said hopefully. “I better get back on patrol. See ya.”

“Tonks is on patrol?” Harry asked Dumbledore.

“For security purposes.” Dumbledore said sadly. “Gone are innocent days when even a carnival for school children cannot go on without protection.” Noticing the glum looks this statement had on the others at his table Dumbledore said brightly. “Do not worry. All possible measures were taken to ensure this event is safe.”

“I really don’t see how anything could happen.” Hermione added. “Nobody knew in time to be able to plan anything.”

“Exactly.” Dumbledore said licking his ice cream again.

“You know. I haven’t seen Hagrid. I mean the real Hagrid, not just his hair anywhere.” Harry looked around as he scraped the sides of his dish for the last bit of sundae.

“Oh, well.” Hermione suddenly looked uncomfortable.

“You will find Hagrid’s concession by his cabin.” Dumbledore eyes twinkled.

“His concession?” Harry glanced at Ron then Hermione.

“Hagrid is selling hippogriff and thestral rides.” Dumbledore said as if Hagrid was offering pony rides.

“Oh no. I wanted to go see him but...” Harry knew he would be called upon to demonstrate the safety of the creatures.

“I never rode a hippogriff.” Ginny commented. “Even when we covered them in Hagrid’s class we didn’t ride them.”

“Actually it isn’t too bad. Not anything like a broom though.” Harry said and he heard Hermione snort.

“It’s horrible Ginny. Every beat of the hippogriff’s wing you feel like you’re going to be pitched off.” Hermione shuddered.

“Let’s go see him anyway.” Ron said standing up. “Maybe there will be such a line we won’t have to offer.” The looks everyone gave Ron made him laugh. “Well it could happen.”

“Not in our life time.” Harry snorted as he rose. “We’ll see you later Professor.”

“Enjoy yourselves.” Dumbledore said as Ginny and Hermione got up and said goodbye to the headmaster.

The one thing Harry noticed most was the lack of students heading toward Hagrid’s cabin. The next thing he noticed was Hagrid standing in his horrible brown hairy suit and checked yellow and orange tie calling.

“Hippogriff rides! Ride a thestral!” Hagrid boomed. And even though the sound traveled to many ears no one ventured to Hagrid ring of hippogriffs and thestrals.

“Hi, Hagrid.” Ron said putting his arms on the fence rail.

“Oh, I thought you four had forgotten where I lived.” Hagrid gazed reproachfully at them.

“We’ve been busy with exams Hagrid.” Hermione seemed hypnotized by the stare of a pure white hippogriff.

“I know Hermione.” Hagrid chuckled.

“How’s business.” Ginny asked looking around.

“Ah well. People seem to be more interested in those new fangled rides rather than a real animal.” Hagrid gave an annoyed glance at the huge Ferris wheel.

“I think they may be worried about how safe hippogriff riding is.” Hermione commented gently.

While Hagrid expanded on the safety of riding a hippogriff, Harry’s eyes strayed to the silky black creature tied to the fence post. Its

orange eye gave a piercing flare at anyone catching its gaze. A movement in the water bucket, on the ground near the hippogriff's talons, made Harry focus his attention on the water. A ripple on the surface faded away. Harry started to turn his attention back to Hagrid when the surface of the water shuddered and faded then shuddered again. His mouth went dry and a cold chill ran up Harry's spine. The water in the bucket quivered again.

“Hagrid.” Harry said then pointed to the bucket. Ginny, Hermione, and Ron turned with Hagrid to look at where Harry indicated.

“What Harry? Is there a bug...” Hagrid stopped as the water moved again. And Harry thought he felt a barely perceptible shake of the ground.

“What does that mean?” Ginny asked looking frightened just by Harry’s and Hagrid’s alarmed faces.

"I'm going to look." Harry said and without waiting to give Hagrid time to stop him Harry soared into the sky.

“Harry, Git back ‘ere.” Hagrid roared.

Quickly Harry climbed high above the castle grounds and gazed around the borders. The mountains near Hogsmeade stood grey and solemn with only a small cap of snow left on their summits. The forbidden forest was an endless array of greens, changing without warning from light to dark. Gliding forward Harry focused his phoenix eyes on the hills near the road leading to the castle gates. Then with a cry of despair Harry appeared beside Hagrid in a flash of flames.

"It's Giants! Hagrid, loads of them." Harry said breathlessly.

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Author's Notes: Thank you one and all for the wonderful Reviews!

Wow, over 9000 words in this chapter. And I didn't put in half the carnival stuff I had wrote down when I was hit with a good idea for a booth or something. I really didn't know what to call this event. It

would be called a fair or a carnival here in the states. And I didn't know if a dunking booth is a familiar thing in England. Here it is common for fairs and social events to raise money.

I didn't expect the carnival to take up so much space but the kids had to have a little fun before....well, can't tell ya that. Anyway at this point I can see at least two more chapters.

Chapter 58

"It's giants!" Harry repeated. "I'm going to find Dumbledore."

"We have to get everyone back to the castle." Hermione said fearfully, looking back to the students at the main part of the carnival.

Harry vanished before he heard the rest of their plan. He soared over the tents searching for Dumbledore. A flash of silver hair made him turn in mid air but the hair belonged to a student. Another head of white appeared with a face much too young to be Dumbledore. There were too many heads with long white hair and silvery beards. Silently Harry cursed those stupid hats then headed for the dunking booth.

"Professor!" Harry shouted above a loud cheer. McGonagall had been plunged into the stink sap again. "I need to talk to you." He glanced anxiously about as the chair brought the head of his house out of the cauldron. "There's trouble." He met his teacher's eyes after she had cleaned and dried herself. With another wave of her wand the chair floated through the air and settled easily on the ground beside Harry.

"What is it Potter?" McGonagall asked rising from the chair. Hurriedly Harry took her by the elbow and pulled her aside. His news made her pull away from him and looking horrified toward the castle gates.

"And I can't find Professor Dumbledore." Harry said. "Too many Weasley hats."

"I can." McGonagall raised her wand, silver shot from the end, whizzing around the heads of the crowd. "Potter, please find the prefects and older students help them return the other students back to the castle."

"Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Hagrid are doing that now." Harry said impatiently looking through the crowd for a sign of Dumbledore. Then, there he was striding quickly toward them Snape at his side followed by Professors Flitwick, Sprout, and Madam Hooch.

"What has happened?" Dumbledore asked.

"I saw giants Professor." Harry said under his breath so the students watching wouldn't hear. "Lots of them, coming up the road."

"Return all students to the castle." Dumbledore ordered. He motioned for Ernie McMillan and Hannah Abbot who were standing near in the group of watching students. "Please use this." He conjured a magical megaphone. "To tell the students they must return to the castle."

"But why?" Ernie asked as glanced at Harry and took the megaphone.

"I will explain later if the reason doesn't become evident on its own." Dumbledore's manner seemed calm but Harry could tell the headmaster was disturbed. He turned to his staff. "Inform the vendors what is happening. Coordinate their efforts if you would with Minerva."

A scream came from the tents closest to the gates followed by several more cries. A cold creeping chill drifted across the tents like the air from a butcher's meat locker.

A long dreadful wail rose and fell, drawing a veil of darkness over the bright day. People were running wildly with fearful glances over their shoulders as if something was following them.

"Dementors," cried McGonagall.

In an instant Harry took to the air again. He saw students sprinting toward the castle but most were running blindly about. Some were on their knees covering their faces in their hands. But he saw no dementors. Several silvery shapes sped toward the retreating students. What Harry did see made the fear inside him grow ten fold. Behind the giants, who were now tearing at the castle's gates, were Death Eaters.

Appearing at Dumbledore's side, Harry found his phoenix form blocked the affects of the dementors for a little time after he had changed. "I can't see the dementors from the air. But Death Eaters are behind the giants." He told the headmaster. The cold began to seep in and a fog hovered in the corners of his mind.

"You must go back to the castle Harry." Dumbledore took him by the arm.

"What?" Harry pulled away. "To hide with the first years?" His eyes blazed at the old wizards. "In the air I can help. And I have an idea."

Dumbledore stared at Harry for the briefest of seconds, worry and pride mixed on his lined face. "Tell me." Dumbledore bent to listen.

"The D. A. members can help." Harry said then quickly told Dumbledore his plan. The next moment Harry materialized in front of Fred and George's tent. The Weasley twins were trying to control the panicked mob running around the booth.

"Fred, George," Harry called to them. "I need a couple of your products."

High over the giants head Harry appeared clutching a bag in his golden talons. With his sharp beak Harry tore a hole in the corner and dove behind the line of giants. Many large marble like balls dropped to the grass and across the road. A shout and several spells shot at Harry. The phoenix instinct in him kicked in and Harry found himself so high in the sky the giants' massive heads were mere dots.

Taking a deep breath Harry transformed back to human. After the first sickening drop, the sound of rushing wind was the only indication he had he was falling. Pulling out his wand Harry pointed it at the ground behind the giants then changed back to the phoenix. As he glided along Harry focused his keen eyes on the Death Eaters.

Voldemort's followers were now struggling through a huge swamp. Several had sunken up to their waist in the mire and muck. Harry returned to Dumbledore to report. "It worked the swamp is slowing them down." He shivered. Harry could feel the coldness of the dementors

"Not for long I'm afraid." Dumbledore said his eyes blazed as they strode toward the giants, students still rushing against their path in terror. Harry glancing down the line of teachers, shop owners and to Harry's surprise beside Tonks marched Kingsley Shacklebolt,

Emmeline Vance and Hestia Jones. Snape strode along with McGonagall.

“Professor Snape!” Harry called and quickly fell into stride beside the potions master. “Take the potion. I’ll get the shield. You can use it.”

“It is for your use Potter.” Snape shook his head and continued walking.

“For once Professor, don’t argue with me.” Harry changed to the phoenix then appeared in the boys’ dorm. He ran to the foot of his bed and flung open his trunk. Quickly he found the shield and lifted it out, carefully unfolding the soft leather wrap.

The moment Harry’s hand touched the carved wood he could feel the magic surge through him as if the shield knew there were dark wizards near and was responding to their power. Laying the shield on the bed Harry changed to his phoenix form and grabbed the leather straps with his talons. Instantly Harry fell onto the bed as a human. Rattled but determined Harry tried to take up the shield in his claws again. The results were the same. The dark magic in the shield must be interfering with his animagus transformation, Harry reasoned. He grabbed the shield and raced down the spiral stairs, through the common room out the portrait hole and down the many stairs to the entrance hall just as Snape emerged from the dungeons.

“I have taken the potions Potter.” Snape said a strange uncertainty in his black eyes.

“I’ll call the runespoor to see if it worked.” Harry panted and slipped his arm through the straps. Long orange and black striped coils appeared by his side. Three heads swayed hissing in three different directions.

“It works.” Snape whispered. “She said, ‘Death to all who stand against the shield holder.’”

“Here.” Harry slipped the wooden shield off and held it out to Snape. “Take it. I can transform to stay out of harms way. If you get hurt the whole time line could change.” Harry thrust the shield forward.

Slowly Snape took the shield. The runespoor turned all three heads to him. "Master?"

"Follow me." Snape hissed. With a pang Harry watched as Snape ran out of the castle with the runespoor at his side. Shrieks echoed into the hall from the steps outside and shortly Hermione came in, ushering a large group of first and second years students, all looking terrified.

"Harry." Hermione gave a nudge to the younger students as she stopped to speak to him. "Go into the Great Hall you'll be safe there." She urged. "Harry, some first years were down near the gate. I couldn't get to them." Hermione choked. "There are so many dementors I barely got this lot up to the castle."

"I'll see what I can do." Harry transformed into a phoenix and sang a couple of notes to hearten the crying students. Then he soared out of the open front doors and appeared high above the battle a moment later. Harry saw the efforts of the teachers and prefects to hurry the students back to the castle. Still he could not see the dementors in his phoenix form. A phoenix was such a positive force the soul sucking demons weren't comprehensible to the phoenix's mind, Harry thought. However, he could see the affects of the dementors on the people below him.

Harry spotted the group of four younger students Hermione had told him about. Two boys and two girls cowering on the ground too overcome by the dementors' influence to move. A tall black robed figure broke from a running crowd and pulled the two boys to their feet, pushing them on toward the castle. Harry saw the older student whirl and raise his wand. Wisps of silver came out of the end. The teen stumbled backward and more silver vapor came from his wand.

Harry checked to see if any help was coming but the bright silver patronuses of the teachers were busy elsewhere. How many dementors were there if Dumbledore and the staff were still fighting them off?

Harry dove and landed beside the first year girls still shaking on the grass. A gasp escaped Harry when he changed to human. Now that he could see them, dementors were everywhere, a thousand strong at the very least. Lucky for Harry a vestige of his phoenix lingered long enough that he remained unaffected by the dementors, even this close.

“Expecto Patronum.” Harry shouted concentrating hard on Ginny. The silver stag leaped from the end of his wand. It charged the dementors gliding toward them. The black robed creatures fled. Then the stag turned and cleared an ever widening circle around Harry and the other students.

The tall blond teen turned and to Harry’s surprise he was a seventh year Slytherin. Harry didn’t know his name. The Slytherin scowled at Harry then stooped to pull the first year girls to their feet.

“Look, I can get you back to the castle.” Harry said. “Hang on to each other okay?” He physically made the pair of girls clasp hands, then Harry looked to the taller boy. “When I change back to the phoenix my patronus will vanish but just grab my tail feathers and I’ll get you out of here.”

“Alright.” The Slytherin nodded grimly.

“Take a hold of one of their hands” Harry instructed. The second the Slytherin had a firm grip on the girl’s hand Harry transformed. He flapped into the air above their head and felt a tug on his tail. A couple of wing beats he was high enough so all below him were off the ground. The next moment Harry materialized high in the entrance hall of the castle. He carefully lowered his passengers to the floor. With a wave from the seventh year Slytherin and another strengthening tone from Harry in answer, once again he was high above the battle before the gates.

The air crackled with cries and shouts of spells flying through the air. The line of witches and wizards on either side of Dumbledore had finally managed to send the dementors off. A boom made the air shiver and Harry saw the gate go flying towards the teachers.

Dumbledore deflected the iron wreckage before it did any harm. The statues of wing boars leapt to life and attacked the massive legs of the giants. Easily distracted, the giants pummeled the stone figures but each tiny bit of stone became another winged boar, smaller but still ferocious in its assault. These minute soldiers caused more confusion for the giants. The huge creatures swung their arms at the tiny statues as if swatting at midges. The Death Eaters behind the giants scattered to avoid the stomping feet, like huge pistons.

Several larger giants pushed through the gate crashers with the Death Eaters following closely. Alarmed by the number of dark wizards, Harry quickly compared the sides. To his relief the balance of power seemed equal or even favored the Hogwarts defenders. If only the teachers had been there to protect Hogwarts, their hope would have been bleak, even with Dumbledore on their side.

A flash of green shot his way made Harry erupt high in the air again. At that height he saw the plan of Voldemort's followers spread out below him. Using the giants' natural spell repelling nature as shields the Death Eaters could advance with no need to even defend themselves.

Shop owners, aurors, teachers and the older students of the D. A. who refused to go back to the castle, teamed up against the giants. Yet, the number of the vast creature combined with Voldemort's supporters, who were now sending spells towards them, caused the line of Hogwarts defenders to move backwards.

The huge Ferris wheel lifted above the heads of the giants and settled on two of them, trapping the huge creatures in the spokes of the wheel. The magic in the wheel must have been powerful for the giants couldn't seem to break out of the frame. So the two giants started fighting the closest thing they could reach, each other. Harry looked around to see Dumbledore directing the wheel's movement. It had started turning, slowly at first but then so fast both giants toppled over in dizziness. Three other giants were knocked over by the fall of the two in the Ferris wheel.

Harry rose high then changed to his human form. After conquering the fear of falling again Harry sent a stunning spell at three death

eaters, hiding behind the fallen giants. Then was once again climbing higher without them knowing where the spell had originated.

This tactic proved useful even after the Death Eaters found the source of the breach in their ranks. Easily avoiding their many hexes aimed at him, Harry relied on his phoenix instinct to take him out of the paths of spells. Once after several death curses shot his way, he appeared so high up Harry was sure no one, not even the largest giant, could see him.

Many flashes caught his eyes. Harry saw Snape, with the shield, deflecting spells of the Death Eaters back at them easily as if he had conjured them himself. Behind the potions master the runespoor struggled with something in her thick orange coils.

Afraid for his serpent friends Harry dove narrowing his vision as he sped to her aid. A burst of phoenix song broke from him as he soared back into the sky laughing. Bound tightly in the long orange scales were Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. Evidently they had tried to attack Snape from behind.

A flash of red hair made Harry turn to see. Ron, Fred, George and to Harry's dismay Ginny stood in the thick of the battle. He tried to shake his fear for her away. Ginny was strong Harry tried to tell himself. Then Harry saw Fred and George push Ginny toward the castle, emphatic in their gestures. One look of Ginny's stubborn face and Harry knew they were wasting their breath.

A quick sweep of the line of wizards showed Harry the D. A. standing strong with Seamus and to his surprise, Neville at the front, Dean Thomas, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Anthony Goldstein, Luna Lovegood and Ernie Macmillan flanking them. Many wizards from the carnival stood along side teachers. Harry did a double take as he saw Remus running and Mad-eye Moody stumping along behind him to join the line.

Returning to hover high above the battle Harry paused to think before switching to cast a spell. Gazing sharply at the confusion on the ground miles below him, a tent suddenly rocketed into the air bursting into a many red hot iron spikes. A yellow flash from Dumbledore's

wand turned the falling spikes into butterflies. As he watched the fluttering insects grow to a huge size and attack the dark wizards, one thing occurred to him, Voldemort was here, somewhere. The Dark Lord was too vain, too arrogant. He would want to see the attack on the school even if he didn't participate.

Carefully Harry scanned the specks, peering through the smoke of many burning tents, sweeping, searching in an ever increasing pattern. Until, there, Harry's eyes narrowed. Voldemort stood high in a huge old tree outside of the Hogwarts' grounds watching his Death Eaters. A laugh escaped Harry sending phoenix song into the air. Voldemort was not pleased about how the battle was progressing. Would the dark wizard join the fight, Harry wondered as he studied his enemy.

Could he kill Voldemort now? The thought seeped into Harry's mind. The only spell he knew would kill was the killing curse. Could he do it? A knot twisted in Harry's stomach. Then Harry saw Voldemort's head raise, looking high into the sky. The phoenix song must have reached him.

A rush of green light just missed Harry then another erupted just where he had been seconds before. The strength and power behind each curse sent a chill through Harry. Not letting up Voldemort fired spell after spell at Harry. Each time he erupted into the air, Harry silently thanked Professor McGonagall for her help with his animagi training. How Voldemort anticipated his movements Harry didn't know but the spells were coming too close. But Harry was afraid to appear by the line of Hogwarts defenders. What if one of the curses hit someone else? Which, after deeper reflection, Harry considered, would not be a bad thing.

The next second Harry appeared in front of the largest giant's head then vanished in a blaze of flame. The death curse sent by Voldemort hit the giant full in the face. Like a large tree being felled the giant crashed to the ground crushing two Death Eaters beneath him. The trees far below Harry shuddered from the giant's fall. Harry focused his eyes on a Death Eater and appeared in front of him but well out of arms reach. With a flash of his human form to show the wizard who

he was, Harry shot away then materialized in front of another giant calling to the Death Eater with his phoenix song.

The Death Eater cast the death curse at him and just before the green light hit, Harry vanished in a burst of fire, reappearing high above to watch another giant crash to the ground. Harry didn't know if the curse actually killed the giants but at least it rendered the massive creatures immobile.

In the back of his mind he kept track of where Voldemort stood as Harry continued to use the Death Eaters curses against them. The Dark Lord hadn't used the death curse again. He remained in the tree with his red eyes blazing at every move Harry made.

Then a green jet came rushing at him the moment he had appeared a mile up in the pale sky. Harry had only a split second to transfer out of its way. By the feel of the curse that had passed so closely, Harry knew Voldemort had sent it. He must have been marking his moves so he could predict where Harry would materialize after feinting with the Death Eater.

That was too close. As magical as his animagi form was, Harry didn't want to chance getting hit by a death curse. He couldn't see himself being reborn from a pile of ashes. Things just weren't that simple. Harry was so high in the sky the stars peeked out from space above and the world turned like a large blue marble below. Yet he was able to focus his phoenix eyes on the battle by merely thinking of Hogwarts.

Again in the back of Harry's mind, a voice urged him to kill Voldemort, now was the time to do it. Yes, he had to do it. Why not now? Harry dove knowing he would have to see Voldemort before he could curse him. Appearing still far above the fighting but close enough Harry could now hear the cries of the battle, once again he searched the tree where Voldemort had been last. The fool was still there. A weight settled in Harry's chest as he changed to human.

"Avada Kedavra!" Harry cried pointing his wand at Voldemort. He saw a sickly green light slowly fly toward his target. Then Harry, intending to change back to his phoenix form, found he couldn't. Real fear

started pounding in Harry's heart as he continued to fall. He tried to change again, air whooshing in his ears. Still he plummeted. A panic welled up in Harry but another voice in his mind, sounding very much like McGonagall's sharp voice, snapped. "Concentrate!"

He forced his mind to calm down. He had thousands of meters to go before he hit the ground, plenty of time to change to a phoenix. But for some reason that thought didn't comfort him. In seeking comfort and calmness Ginny's face appeared and easily replaced his fears. One thought of her smiling at him and Harry was soaring into the air again, sighing in relief.

At his lofty height Harry saw Voldemort hadn't been harmed by his death curse. Why hadn't he been able to transform after casting the Avada Kedavra curse? Harry considered as he glided on a thermal trying to calm his rapidly beating heart. The only explanation Harry could think of was phoenixes and dark magic just don't mix. Like when he tried to pick up the runespoor shield and not being able to see the dementors. Dumbledore, himself, had said Fawkes had refused to heal Snape; perhaps he was too close to dark magic for the phoenix.

His heart sank. At least in his phoenix form he was powerful and able to fight. Standing face to face with Voldemort wasn't within his strength. Harry forced himself to add the word 'yet' to this thought. There was no way he could kill Voldemort today. The best he could do was to help protect Hogwarts. With this in mind Harry turned his attention back to the battle.

The Dark Lord was again searching for him, Harry could tell as he watched Voldemort search the sky. An idea formed in Harry's thoughts. His eyes sought and found a particular Death Eater, Lucius Malfoy. The cold gray eyes discernable even at this height with his phoenix sight.

Materializing in front of the masked face Harry changed to human. "You're losing." A stunning spell ruffled his feathers as he transferred a quarter turn to Malfoy's left. "Most of the..." Harry left the space and had Malfoy facing the direction he wanted now. "Giants are on the ground." Harry said quickly appearing farther away in the same

direction. This was too easy. Harry could hardly believe it. He kept leading Malfoy along, like a dog on a leash, taunting and jeering at the Death Eater as curses exploded around him. Not once did Harry feel worried his phoenix form couldn't get him out of the way in time. Nevertheless he kept his guard up, using all the instinct his phoenix form gave him to warn him of spells coming his way.

Once Harry had Malfoy right where he wanted him, he dropped a couple of Fred and George's everlasting smoke pellets to obscure the air around him. Malfoy sent a powerful stunning spell when Harry appeared; not knowing Voldemort stood on the other side of the thick smoke and saw Harry too. A powerful killing curse sped toward him from Voldemort but Harry was high in the sky when the two curses crashed together, adding more smoke between them. A volley of spells shot through the dense fog between Voldemort and Malfoy. Harry laughed not daring to hope they would finish each other off thinking they were fighting him.

A flash of red made Harry focus on Malfoy and he saw the Death Eater's robes on fire. Quickly Malfoy put out the flame. Darting down Harry stood behind him. "Getting a bit singed?" The fury in the soot smeared face made Harry laugh as he transformed again and burst into flames as a green light flew from Malfoy's wand.

His main concern was where the missed curses were landing. Malfoy's spells shot into the hills beyond the gates. The Dark Lord had not set foot inside the Hogwarts grounds. Voldemort curses Harry had tried to direct at the legs of the giants, now in a state of panic, stamping around as they tried to leave the battle and run for the forest. The line of wizards and witches had kept the huge creatures at bay.

A soft cry pierced Harry's heart. "Ginny!" His first thought was to get to her at all cost and he darted forward but Harry stopped and transferred high above the battle once more. If he drew Voldemort's fire toward her he could do more harm than good. Concentrating on Ginny, his vision narrowed to the group of students holding firm beside Snape and the runespoor.

Where was Ginny? Harry searched frantically, not caring about the rest of the fight. Then he saw her red hair. He tightened his focus, his wings faltered and Harry was sure his heart stopped. Half laying on a prone figure was Ginny. Was she hurt? Harry couldn't tell. He couldn't even think of anything worse. But the mere thought of Ginny being injured sent a surge of anger and rage through Harry and the next moment he stood beside Voldemort. Not feeling any of the pain he normally felt around Voldemort, only a wrath so intense red sparks shot from Harry's wand.

"Very brave, to attack a school." Harry said angrily then vanished to appear behind the Dark Lord. "Thought you would have an easy go?" Harry vanished again as Voldemort whirled. When Harry materialized in a flash of flame behind the dark wizard again the green light rushed at him but Harry was several steps to the right of the path of deadly curse as it went by him. Anticipating Voldemort spun again and shot the killing curse behind him. But Harry was beside him again.

"Even the students are beating your Death Eaters." Harry sent a stunning spell at Voldemort which was easily blocked.

"Only trying to stun me Harry Potter?" Voldemort turned slowly trying to guess where Harry would appear next. "Hasn't that old fool taught you to kill yet?" Voldemort started turning rapidly, firing stunning spells around him not caring if he hit his own people.

"No. I'll probably learn that from Snape." Harry smirked as he stood on a tree branch only six feet above Voldemort. The force of the spell that hit the tree stripped every leaf from its branches. Slowly the leaves fluttered to the ground. "You can't hit me." Harry said calling from somewhere in the sky.

Frustrated Voldemort shot more stunners oblivious to the Death Eaters running through the arch of the missing gate in desperate retreat. The moment the dark masked wizards were off the school grounds they disappeared.

"My Lord. It is no good." Malfoy panted running up to Voldemort as he cradled his left arm which looked broken. "We must go now. There are too many." The Death Eater no longer wore his mask, his blonde

hair was streaked with blood and clung to his sweaty pale face. "My Lord, he is coming, we must go." Malfoy pleaded with his master.

Voldemort, shaking with rage, stared up at the phoenix gazing down at him. Malfoy backed away and disappeared at the horrible look on Voldemort's face when his master finally turned to him. Harry could tell it cost Voldemort everything to be forced to leave without being able to kill him. The next instant Voldemort vanished with a loud crack.

With the speed of a bullet Harry appeared beside Ginny. As if frozen in stone Ginny was as he had seen her before confronting Voldemort. But now, Harry could see she was draped over Fred's chest.

"Ginny." Harry's hands shook as he reached out to touch her. Afraid of what he might find. But her body was warm and he felt her breathing. He ran his hand up her back to her cheek then he pushed back her hair. "Ginny." Harry whispered. "Ginny?" He repeated desperately, oblivious to the tents burning and shouts still flying around him.

Ginny gave a gasp and her chest rose and fell in deep shudders. Harry pulled her into his arms. "Ginny!" He cried out. "Ginny, talk to me." He ran a hand down each of her arms and glanced over her limp form. Nothing physically seemed to be wrong with her.

"Harry?" Ron's tired voice seemed to come from a far off distance. Harry felt Hermione's hands on his shoulders. Glancing up from gazing into Ginny's face, Harry saw George dropping to his knees beside his twin. His breaths came in short gasps as he took his brother's hand.

"Fred?" Never had Harry heard such anguish in a single spoken word.

"What happened?" Harry whispered.

"Fred was hit by...." Hermione leaned on Harry and gave a sob. Ron put his arms around her.

“He’s not dead!” George leapt to his feet shouting at Hermione, angry tears in his eyes. “He can’t be...” Just as quickly as it had come his anger faded and George collapsed onto Fred’s chest.

To Harry it seemed like time itself had stopped. No one moved. No one spoke. Whether one minute or one hour passed Harry didn’t know. That was the way Dumbledore found them, Ron holding on to Hermione, Harry cradling Ginny and George sobbing on Fred’s body.

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Author’s Notes: Thanks for all the reviews! I’ll probably have to go into hiding for this chapter.

Everybody wanted to see the dunking contest. I did have bits of it in my head but it never really fit into the story. However, if I decide to do a seventh year story, and I need to come up with a strong idea of a plot for that to happen, I will sneak in the contest.

Chapter 59

Harry watched as the old wizard solemnly knelt by Fred and felt his neck. Instead of shaking his head in regret, Dumbledore's eyes grew wide. He shoved George out of the way to press his ear against Fred's chest. His face full of awe, Dumbledore whispered as if saying it too loud would make it untrue "Fred is still alive."

With a wave of his wand, a stretcher appeared and gently Dumbledore lifted Fred onto it. "We must hurry." He caught Harry's eyes for a moment. And in the quick silent exchange Dumbledore knew Harry was fine. "Bring Ginny, Harry." Then Dumbledore held his wand out and moved the stretcher carrying Fred. Harry conjured a stretcher for Ginny and guided it behind the headmaster.

They proceeded up lawn through the wrecked tents and burning debris. Harry was only dimly aware of teachers also directing stretchers toward the castle. He barely heard Hermione's stifled sobs as she walked with Ron. All he could think of was Ginny, so pale and still. But alive he told himself. She's alive. He repeated this in his mind all the way up the stone steps into the entrance hall and up to the hospital wing.

Never had Harry seen the infirmary in such a state. Every bed was occupied and more had been set up to accommodate the injured. Medi wizards must have flooded in to help Madam Pomfrey. A healer quickly took over Ginny's care and shooed Harry, Ron and Hermione out into the hall. Harry considered briefly about going back to the grounds to help but he didn't want to leave Ginny.

"Hermione, please stop crying." Ron's voice cracked as if he was having a hard time obeying his own words. He was holding her close as she shook.

"It's my fault." Hermione sobbed.

"No Hermione, it wasn't." Harry said softly. "Thanks to you the school is safe."

Hermione looked up, her face puffy and her eyes full of tears. "Don't patronize me Harry." She said angrily. "If I hadn't thought of this stupid carnival..."

"If you hadn't thought of this carnival there wouldn't have been enough wizards here to defend Hogwarts." Harry told her. "I don't think you realize how large of an army Voldemort flung at us. If only the teachers and the D.A. had been here, even with Dumbledore we couldn't have survived."

"But." Hermione blinked and sniffed.

"No buts Hermione." Harry took her hand. "I know it wasn't intentional but you saved Hogwarts. Voldemort didn't know there was anything going on here. I don't think he would have attacked if he had known." Hermione pulled away from Ron and hugged Harry.

"Ginny will be okay." Hermione said leaning back against Ron who had put his hands on her shoulder. Her flickering glance over her shoulder told Harry she wasn't sure about Fred.

Suddenly Harry felt totally drained. He didn't think he had the strength to conjure a toothpick. So the three friends slid to the floor with their back against the stone wall, watching and waiting, while stragglers with minor injuries filed down the hall and into the infirmary.

Sharp footsteps echoed down the hall and Harry lifted his head to look as he heard a hiss. Snape, still holding the wooden shield, strode down the hall, the runespoor at his side. Harry stood up and felt Ron and Hermione get to their feet. Snape stared at Harry for a moment.

"You are uninjured?" Snape's black eyes darted to Ron and Hermione.

"I'm fine. Ginny and Fred Weasley." Harry's throat tightened. He looked at the runespoor. "Are you okay?"

"Yessss." Hermione laid her head on his shoulder. "The battle was good."

“Yessss.” Giza’s eyes flashed. “I have taught death today.” Her tone made Harry shiver.

“Are you alright Professor?” Hermione asked.

“The shield is excellent protection.” Snape said. “I am unharmed.”

“What happened to Malfoy? I saw the runespoor holding him. Did Giza bite them?” Harry wasn’t quite sure if he would be upset if she had.

“No,” Snape said slowly as if he disapproved of the runespoor’s restraint. “Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle are currently locked in the dungeons. They will await trial and judgment of the headmaster.”

A cry from the infirmary made Harry spring to his feet and burst inside. “Ginny!” Two mediwizards were restraining Ginny as she fought frantically to get away. Harry felt Ron and Hermione next to him as he hurried over. “Ginny.” Harry repeated in a soothing tone taking her hand. “Let go of her.” He frowned at the tight grip the mediwizards had on her. She flung herself into his arms the moment she was released.

“I can’t get to him.” Ginny gripped his t-shirt. She had a wild anxious look in her eyes that startled him. He caught her by the waist knowing she couldn’t have stood up without his support. “Fred, he’s not here. He’s can’t hear me. He’ll get lost.” She sobbed and seemed to melt. Harry caught her up in his arms and looked to the mediwizards. The healer with a clipboard pointed to the empty bed. Gently, Harry laid Ginny on the bed and pulled the light sheet and blanket over her.

“Her brother was taken to St. Mungo’s. There seems to be a connection between them draining her strength.” The mediwizard explained. “If Miss Weasley tried to help him further she would endanger herself.”

She started struggling again. “Ginny you need to rest. You won’t do yourself any good wearing yourself out.” Harry told her as he held her in bed.

"I don't care." Ginny shouted in a burst of energy that was short lived.
"I don't care. He's my brother." She whispered.

"Ginny will be alright?" Ron asked the healer. He stared worriedly at her sudden fatigue.

"I expect she'll make a full recovery once she gets her strength back. Extraordinary what happened." The healer said. "If you would be so kind as to keep her calm, I'll fetch a sleeping potion and strengthening solution." Harry nodded and the mediwizard hurried off.

"If Fred was sent to St. Mungo's he must still be alive." Hermione said softly.

"Yeah." Ron said dully. "I can't imagine what George is going through."

"If anyone can keep Fred alive it's George." Harry said distractedly. He bent over her and said quietly. "Ginny, think about resting and getting stronger so you can help Fred." He pushed her red hair away from her face and kissed her forehead. "Rest now." As hard as Ginny tried to fight it, her eyes refused to stay open. Harry's gentle stroking affecting her as much as her touch had him. When the healer returned Harry held Ginny's head up so they could get the potion down her before she fell completely asleep.

"How is Ginny doing?" Even though the voice was quiet it made Harry, Ron and Hermione jump.

"Remus! Are you alright?" Harry asked as he was given a one arm hug by Lupin.

"I'm fine. Just a few scrapes." Remus gave Hermione a hug and gripped Ron's neck. "I've never been so glad to see three... four faces." He corrected nodding at Ginny.

"What did they say about Fred? Did you hear?" Ron asked swallowing hard. Harry could see his best friend struggling to keep it together.

"It's not good, Ron. I won't lie to you." Remus sighed tiredly. "Let's go into the Great Hall. I think some sort of dinner is being served." He held up his hand to keep from being interrupted. "It's too crowded in here for extra people to be just standing around. We'll be in the way. Ginny will sleep for sometime I expect. We can at least sit down and get something to drink." Harry, Ron and Hermione reluctantly agreed and followed Remus down to the Great Hall.

The Great Hall wasn't empty. On the contrary it was full of students. But the only sound was the occasional clink of cutlery on plates and a stifled crying that echoed in the silence so it seemed like the room itself wept.

"Remus, did...did anyone get killed? From Hogwarts?" Hermione asked gazing around the hall as if looking for missing people. For a long time the man didn't answer then he nodded. Harry, Ron and Hermione waited.

"Dennis Creevey." Remus said hoarsely and stared at his hands. Slowly he raised his eyes to meet Harry's. Several time he opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. He took a sip of juice and stared at the goblet. "It seems one of the Death Eaters thought he was you Harry."

A vision of Dennis Creevey and his brother Colin with black hair like his, laughing and having a good time, made Harry's stomach twist into a knot. He felt his throat close and he put his face in his hands.

"Dumbledore didn't want me to tell you until things calmed down. I told him he had to stop treating you like china." Remus said gravely putting an arm across Harry's shoulders. "Now or later it wouldn't hurt any less." Harry nodded without speaking.

"How did you know to come and help Remus?" Ron asked his voice as husky as Lupin's.

"By the floo network." Remus said. "Dumbledore has always made sure there were members of the order ready to help if needed."

"Alright Harry?" Seamus asked as he, Dean and Neville came up beside the table and sat down across from Harry, Ron and Hermione. Behind them were many members of the D.A., all who sat down at the Gryffindor table too.

"Yeah, you?" Harry asked glancing quickly over the group.

"Fine." Ernie McMillan said. "We managed to protect most of our squad." He didn't smile but his eyes held a keen look of satisfaction then a shadow passed across all the faces. Harry knew they were all thinking of Dennis Creevey.

"That's great." I'm really proud of all of you." Harry thought his praise sounded hollow. But Ernie glanced at the others with pride.

"You were amazing Harry." Hannah Abbot said. The other D.A. members echoed her words.

"It's not just my fight." Harry said feeling his face flush. "Today proved that beyond any doubt."

"There's never been any doubt about that." Neville said seriously. "We know Harry. And we know you don't like to be singled out but we had to give credit where credit is due."

Harry saw out of the corner of his eye the other D.A. members nodding in agreement with Neville. Ron and Hermione eyed him cautiously as if wondering if he would explode in anger but he wasn't angry. He didn't really know what to feel. Gazing at each one then speaking to Neville, Harry said. "Then give all of yourselves as much credit as me." He said sincerely.

"Indeed." Remus said. "I was impressed by all of your skills." Again Harry flushed as all eyes turned toward him. "Ah, the D.A." He nudged Harry in jest. "Good work Professor Potter."

"You are a good teacher Harry but your year end exams are dreadful." Ron smirked at Harry's discomfort. If the horror of the battle had not been so fresh Ron most likely would have gotten many laughs with his quip but the others barely smiled at him.

Ron yawned widely and rubbed his eyes. "What time is it?"

"It's only seven o'clock." Hermione said checking her watch then yawned herself. Lupin seemed to have enough sense not to suggest they go to bed.

Some time during the long evening in the Great Hall and the comings and goings of many people, exhaustion took over. Harry blinked once and thankfully his mind closed against all the images of the battle as he fell asleep at the Gryffindor table.

In his unremembered dream a voice called him and the next moment Harry found himself in the infirmary as a phoenix. Ginny was again fighting hysterically with the mediwizards trying to give her a potion.

"Harry, we were just about to send for you." Dumbledore motioned him over. "Perhaps you can calm Ginny enough to allow the healers to treat her."

When Harry took Ginny's hand she gripped it as if her life depended upon it. "Calm down Ginny. You have to rest to help anyone." Harry stroked her fringe off her sweaty forehead. "Here." He held out a hand and took the goblet the healer held. In two big gulps Ginny had down the potion. The mediwizard sighed with relief.

"Thank you." He said. "She should sleep through the night now." The healer nodded to the headmaster and went to the next bed.

"Do you wish to sit with her for a time?" Dumbledore asked. Then without waiting for an answer he conjured two chintz arm chairs beside Ginny's bed. The Headmaster sank into one. Harry knew Dumbledore was staring at him but he didn't care. He gave Ginny a kiss on the cheek and still holding her hand sat on the edge of the bed.

Neither spoke for a long time. Harry had caught the old wizard's studying him with an expression he didn't know how to read. But Harry was too tired to ask about anything right now. All he needed to

know was Ginny would be fine. Then Harry thought of her brother. "How is Fred?" He asked quietly.

"His body lives." Dumbledore said gravely. "We're not sure what happened. I was attempting to find out but Ginny became too agitated to convey what took place. She doesn't seem to be able to hear or connect to anyone but you." The old wizard commented. "Only when Ginny is calm enough will we be able to help either." Harry felt Ginny's hand go slack as she fell under the influence of the potion.

"I heard her call me." Harry stared at her hand as he stroked the back of it. "In my sleep."

"She did call for you." Dumbledore said. "Your heart heard her."

Harry gave half laugh then turned to Dumbledore and said quietly. "I suppose it did." He sat down in the other chair and met the man's eyes with a slight smile but didn't say anything more.

"You astound me, Harry." Dumbledore said. With his elbow propped on the arm of his chair, he leaned his chin against his hand. "I never expected anything like what you did yesterday."

The smile vanished from Harry's face and he dropped his gaze to his hands in his lap. What I didn't do, you mean. He thought to himself then Harry said sounding defeated. "I couldn't kill him. I tried."

"I saw." Dumbledore said quickly. "Your fall nearly gave me a heart attack."

"The killing curse didn't work for me." Harry's face was stone now, all the warmth of Ginny's touch drained from him.

"I knew it wouldn't." Dumbledore said quietly.

"What do you mean?" Harry frowned at him.

"Your strength does not lie in the dark arts." Dumbledore reached out to place his hand over Harry's. "A simple touch tells me this."

Harry patted the slender old hand and a smile flickered on his face. "I don't think touching Voldemort is going to eliminate him."

"I doubt it would either." Dumbledore chuckled then said seriously. "You have no reason to think you have failed in battle. I have never been more proud of any one person in my life Harry." His bright blue eyes twinkled behind a standing tear.

"Cheers, Professor." Harry sighed. Not that he didn't appreciate Dumbledore's compliment. It was just he didn't think he deserved that much praise. Others had fought just as hard. "You didn't do so bad yourself."

They sat in silence for a long time. Then Harry asked a question that had been on his mind since the attack. "How did Voldemort get so many followers? I never expected to see so many Death Eaters."

"He didn't." Dumbledore's face looked hard and grave. "It is true. Voldemort has more Death Eaters than he had a year ago. But the front lines of his army were wizards and witches controlled by the imperious curse." The old wizard sighed. "And those were the ones injured or killed by our people."

And Harry hadn't thought he could feel any worse. How horrible it must have been for those people to have to fight and not being able to stop. "What happen to the giants?" He asked.

"Many are dead. A few fled into the Forbidden Forest and the rest are scattered over the countryside." Dumbledore said.

"That's not good." Harry wondered how much the Ministry could cover up with giants roaming the land.

"No, but that is the least of our worries." Dumbledore shrugged as if he didn't see a problem with giants strolling through peoples' gardens.

"Hogwarts was very lucky this time." Harry scooted his chair closer to Ginny's bed to take her hand as she became restless.

“Yes, but Hogwarts was not their main objective.” Dumbledore said. Harry looked at him sharply. “Several Death Eaters were overheard saying they had to get the traitor or the girl. The main goal was to breach Hogwarts defenses, to show they could, then to take those who Voldemort order them to acquire.”

“Snape and Ginny?” Harry felt an anger begin to burn inside him. “Why them and not me?”

“They assumed you would be too well guarded.” Dumbledore said. “Professor Snape slipped through Voldemort’s grasp much to his ire. Ginny, well...” The headmaster’s face darkened.

“Because she’s close to me.” Harry finished feeling a knot twist in his stomach.

“No Harry that is not the reason.” Dumbledore said sharply. “It is because of Ginny’s first year at Hogwarts, when Tom Riddle possessed her.” Dumbledore frowned. “I dare not think of what use Voldemort has for her. But he has something in mind other than using her as a lure for you.”

The fire smoldering flared in Harry at the mere thought of Voldemort touching Ginny for any purpose. “Voldemort doesn’t know the danger he is in if he messes with Ginny.” Harry said slowly looking into Dumbledore’s eyes, the old wizard seemed startled by his expression. “But I will be sure to tell him.”

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Never leaving Ginny’s bedside Harry watched as one by one the other patients were released. Ron and Hermione stayed with by Ginny’s side too until their prefect duties took them away. As evening fell, the surrounding beds were emptied. On the only occupied bed in the infirmary, Ginny tossed fretfully as she fought the sleeping potion. She opened her eyes before Harry could sooth her restlessness.

“I can’t sleep here.” Ginny complained then added in tired voice. “I hear him screaming.”

“Fred?” Harry asked quietly. “He’s not here Ginny. He’s at St. Mungo’s”

“Take me to him Harry, please?” Ginny pleaded taking Harry’s hand in both of hers. “I know you can. Please Harry, please.”

“I could.” Harry said engulfing her small hands into his. ‘But you’re too weak, Ginny. You need rest before you see him again or it won’t help either of you.” Harry felt horrible as she began to cry as if her heart was broken. “Ah Ginny don’t.” He felt like crying with her. He cupped her cheek and wiped the tears away with his thumb.

“Take me away from here, to our place.” Ginny sobbed desperately. “I can’t stand it here.”

“If you promise to rest once I get you there.” Harry said before he changed into his phoenix form.

“I promise.” Ginny took a hold of his tail feathers as he flapped above her bed. The next moment she was shivering against Harry in the dank underground passage which had once led to Hogsmeade before the majority of it had collapsed.

Still supporting Ginny’s weight Harry drew out his wand and created a fireplace, complete with a blazing fire. Ginny put her arms around his neck and kissed him with more strength than Harry had expected. Her actions became more aggressive as she pressed her thinly clad body against him.

“Make love to me Harry.” Ginny whispered in his ear then kissed his neck.

A tingling numbness froze Harry as the thought of making love to Ginny coursed through his body. He closed his eyes and kissed her deeply. “Are you sure?” Harry asked hoarsely when he broke the kiss. He pulled back so he could see her face.

“Yes. Please Harry!” Ginny tried to kiss him again but Harry cupped her cheek and looked into her eyes.

"Ginny, I don't want to make love to you like this." Harry gazed searchingly into her eyes. "Your eyes are sad not full of passion. When we make love for the first time it's not going to be when you're scared for Fred."

"I don't care Harry. I just want to feel something other than afraid." Ginny's eyes filled with tears. Harry pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her.

"I'll hold you all night if you want. But when we make love for the first time it won't be because you need me to make you feel better." Harry said quietly into her hair. He could feel her shaking and knew she was crying. "Fred is strong Ginny. He has George to bring him back."

"No, you didn't feel it..." Ginny shook her head against his chest. "I don't want to think about it anymore." Harry felt her lean tiredly against him. He drew his wand out and conjured a wide couch. Gently Harry pushed Ginny down onto the soft cushions and stretched out beside her, gritting his teeth as she pressed close against him. "I can't stop thinking about it." She shivered and tried to move even closer to him.

"Lay quiet and I'll tell you about what Snape and I have been up to." Harry said huskily, stroking her arms and back.

"Really?" Ginny pulled away to look at Harry then blushed when she saw the hunger in his eyes. She seemed realize he was breathing rather funny. "Sorry." She rolled to put her back to him and only leaned against his chest. "Better."

"Different." Harry sighed sliding his hand down her arm to clasp her hand. "You know baby Cleo goes back in time with him?" He felt her nod. "Well, they go back to see my Mom." Harry proceeded to tell Ginny all about the time tuner he had found in the cemetery, the time controller and Fredrick Potter's wandering journey through time. "The only things we don't know; is how to activate the timers and what Snape says or takes back with him to convince my mom he's legit."

"Wow." Ginny whispered. Evidently the story had taken her mind off of Fred. "I don't know what to say." She turned around to look at him

again. "He's going to see your mother. That has to be...hard for you." She touched his face as she gazed into his eyes.

"Yeah, if I dwell on it too much." Harry sighed. "I just can't think of something that would convince her to trust this older version of Snape." Harry deflected the conversation to something less painful.

"What about this?" Ginny dangled her wrist in front of Harry's eyes and unfastened the bracelet he had given her. "You said it was hers. She would have the one she put in the box of letters when Snape showed it to her." She held it out to him.

"That's an idea." Harry took the bracelet. "But I'm not sure it will be enough." Ginny rolled back around. They were both quiet for a long moment.

"Harry?" Ginny's voice sounded hopeful. "I know this will sound weird but hear me out okay?"

"Sure." Harry said.

"When I was little we had this game we would play with Mom. All seven of us would put on a clean t-shirt for five minutes then we would fold them neatly and set them on the table. Mom would sniff each one and she could tell every single time who wore what shirt." Ginny told him.

"That's interesting but..." Harry was confused.

"She told me a mother always knows the smell of her baby, no matter how big that baby gets." Ginny broke in. "What if you sent a t-shirt you had worn? She would know your smell and there's no way anybody could duplicate that."

"That sounds like what we've been looking for." Harry said taking deep breaths. "Snape's going to be thrilled taking a worn t-shirt along." He tried to laugh but it just wasn't funny.

Ginny pulled his arms around her again and patted his hands. "Now we have to figure out how to activate your time turner and time leaper." Ginny stated as if it was her problem as much as his.

"If only Fredrick Potter had told me before he left." Harry said. "What?" He had felt Ginny stiffen in his arms.

"Maybe he did." Ginny said thoughtfully. "Cleo said it too, don't you remember? 'Remember me when it is 'time to go.' Time to go, the last thing Fredrick Potter said."

Harry sat up abruptly and stared down at her. "I can't believe Snape and I have been racking our brains all this time and you come up with it just like that." He snapped his fingers. "You're right, it can't be a coincidence."

Grinning up at him, Ginny shrugged. "Sometimes a third brain helps in seeing the whole picture."

"I sure don't need a pensive to see patterns." Harry gave a laugh as he settled behind Ginny again. "I'll just run it by you."

"That's what you get for keeping secrets from your girlfriend, a sore brain." Ginny poked at his hands. She sighed and yawned.

"Look you better rest. You promised if I got you out of the hospital wing you would sleep better." Harry rubbed her arms. "Madam Pomfrey will have my hide if you don't."

"So you don't really care if I rest, just that you don't get in trouble." Ginny grumbled tiredly.

"How do girls do that? Twist what a guy says into something totally different from what he meant?" Harry said exasperated. He felt Ginny giggle.

"It's a secret how we do it." Ginny yawned again. "We do it to drive you crazy."

“That you do Gin.” Harry said softly as her breathing evened into sleep. He wondered if Madam Pomfrey was looking for her patient yet. He had left a feather behind as a hint she was with him. For a long time Harry lay listening to Ginny breathe. His body, too charged with the feel of her, was taking a while to calm down. But he didn’t regret his restraint. Making love to Ginny wasn’t going to be tainted by ill feelings. Things like that needed the right time to be done properly. In the back of Harry’s mind a nagging voice asked. ‘Do you have the luxury of time?’

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“Fred!” Ginny screamed so loud it sounded as if her throat would tear. Instantly awake, Harry held her so she wouldn’t get up. She struggled against him briefly then lay shivering, not crying but shaking so violently Harry was afraid for her.

“Calm down, Ginny.” Harry stroked her hair and arms. “Take deep breaths.”

“I can’t stop remembering.” Ginny’s teeth chattered. “I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Then tell me.” Harry wrapped his arms firmly around her. “Tell me what happened.” Harry remembered how telling Dumbledore about the horrible events in that graveyard had helped him.

“Oh, Harry, it was awful.” Ginny’s voice shook. “The Death Eaters were hiding behind the bodies of the giants. Just shooting curses over them without even bothering trying to aim at anyone. Crabbe’s or Goyle’s dad, I don’t know which I could tell it was one of the big thugs.” Ginny said with distaste. “Shot a killing curse our way. It was like time suddenly moved in slow motion. I saw Fred step back into the path of it as he was dueling with another Death Eater.” Her voice faltered.

“Go on.” Harry encouraged.

“I grabbed him to pull him out of the way but it hit.” Ginny flinched then whispered. “I never felt anything like it before. I could feel Fred

being blown from his body. I held on as tightly as I could.” She gave a sob. “It hurt him so horribly. I felt the agony he was in.” Ginny took a couple of panting breaths. “He started slipping from my grasp. I couldn’t hold on to him.”

“You aren’t talking about his body are you?” Harry asked.

“No, I was holding on to his life, Harry.” Ginny said fearfully. “But the spell ripped him from my grasp. I saw him so I called for him to come back. But he didn’t hear me or see me.” Ginny became agitated and suddenly sat up to look at Harry. “He’s lost. He can’t get back unless he has help.” Ginny’s eyes bore into Harry’s. “I have to help him get back.”

“But you said he couldn’t see or hear you.” Harry reminded her meeting her strong stare. “How can you help him?”

“I don’t know.” Ginny dropped her gaze to her hands. “I’m afraid he’ll go the wrong way. He’ll try you know. That’s the thing Fred would do. Try to find his way back or to someplace.”

“Yeah, it would be like Fred to try something.” Harry agreed then said confidently. “George will bring him back. They’re so close...”

“Harry! That’s it!” Ginny grabbed his hands. “George has to help me find Fred.” Her eyes shown brightly in the flickering flames of the fire as a new hope shown from them. “I know how to help Fred. Please take me to him!”

“Ginny, you aren’t strong enough.” Harry said firmly.

Taking a deep breath Ginny spoke in the calm controlled voice. “Remember how you told me you just knew how to fly? That nobody had to tell you what to do?” Harry nodded, confused at the abrupt change of subject. “I’m finding my empathic abilities are like that. Sometimes I just know what to do. And I know what to do for Fred.”

“But,” Harry saw the conviction in her eyes.

“Fred doesn’t have much time.” Ginny implored. “I need to go now. Please believe me.”

“Alright.” Harry nodded, knowing he was going to be in big trouble with several people not the least being Mrs. Weasley.

True to his thoughts, Mrs. Weasley rounded on Harry the moment they appeared in Fred’s hospital room at St. Mungo’s. “Harry!” Mrs. Weasley said angrily. “Take Ginny back to school at once!”

“Ginny said she can help Fred find his way back.” Harry tried not to flinch at Mrs. Weasley’s glare. Ginny started to push her way toward her brother. The healer attending to Fred drew away with an awed look on his face. Mr. Weasley started toward them but stopped as his wife’s anger grew.

“No!’ Mrs. Weasley cried. “I won’t allow Ginny to get hurt trying to help Fred.” She grabbed her daughter’s arm but Ginny didn’t seem to hear her or feel the restraint. She continued trying to get to Fred.

Harry laid his hand on Mrs. Weasley’s that had a tight grip on Ginny’s upper arm. “Mrs. Weasley do you think I would do anything to hurt Ginny?” Her face softened.

“No, Harry, but...” Mrs. Weasley’s breath came faster.

“You have to trust your daughter. Trust her ability to know what she’s doing.” Harry insisted. “Ginny said she can find Fred and I believe her.” Mrs. Weasley’s eyes darted to her husband then to her son lying on the bed, so pale his freckles seemed to be raised.

“She also told me Fred doesn’t have much time. He will try to find his own way. You know he will.” Harry gently lifted Mrs. Weasley’s hand from Ginny’s arm and held it in his. “Trust her.” He urged softly. Harry could feel her hands shaking but Mrs. Weasley gave a slight nod then turned to looked at Ginny in wonder.

The moment she had been released, Ginny moved to Fred’s bedside and placed her hand over his forehead. “Fred?” Ginny whispered then shook her head. “He won’t listen to me. I need George.” She

looked at Harry even though George sat in a chair straight across the bed from her.

“George hurry.” Harry waved him over. With a confused look on his face George got up and walked around the bed to where Ginny and Harry was standing. Harry put her brother’s hand into Ginny’s. “George is here.”

As if seeing George for the first time, Ginny gave a little start and stared at him. “You’ll have to call him. Fred will listen to you. Tell him to come with you.” Ginny said as if instructing a four year old how to tie his shoes.

“He can’t hear me.” George said sullenly and tried to pull away from her but her tight grip prevented him.

Ignoring his attempts to get away, Ginny moved as if in slow motion and took Fred’s hand. She didn’t close her eyes but Harry knew she was seeing something they couldn’t. Or was in someplace other than the hospital room.

“Follow me George.’ Ginny said mechanically.

“What? Oh.” A gasp came from George and his eyes darted around in fear.

“I see Fred. Call him. He won’t hear me.” Ginny said.

Her voice calmed George and he called to his twin. “Oy, Fred. Over here.”

“Louder.” Ginny ordered. “Use your mind more than your voice.”

“Fred.” George whispered to the room.

“He’s closer can you see him?” Ginny asked.

“No, wait yes. Oy Fred.” Harry could see an internal struggle on all three freckled faces. “No! Not that way you idiot.” George shouted. On the bed Fred’s body gave an involuntary jerk.

"Can you touch him? Take his hand." Ginny said.

"No! Ginny, I can't breathe in here!" George panted. "Wait! Fred? Hurry! This way!" Both Ginny and George swayed. Harry put both hands on Ginny's shoulders. Mr. Weasley braced his son. Mrs. Weasley had hidden her face behind her hands.

Then a joyous look crossed George's face and tears started streaming down his cheeks. "Fred! I thought I'd lost you."

"We've got to leave now." Ginny said, leaning back against Harry. "George you have to come with me. Fred, you stay here." Her voice had the tone of giving a dog a command. "George you have to follow me. Fred will be alright now." She sounded tired and slowly let go of Fred's hand but still held tightly to George's. He stumbled back into Mr. Weasley's arms. Harry caught Ginny as she let go of George.

She opened her eyes slightly to smile at him. "We did it. He's back." With a sigh Ginny closed her eyes and rested her head against Harry's chest. Mr. Weasley helped George into the chair where he had been, on the other side of Fred's bed.

"Fred?" Mrs. Weasley had chanced a peek between her fingers at her daughter's words. She sounded as weak as Ginny did.

"George, will have to call him." Ginny said tiredly. A wave of relief washed over Harry as she smiled at her mother. Ginny could see other people now.

"Fred." George whispered his voice raspy. A flutter of his twin's eyelids made everyone gasp. Turning his head, Harry started as he saw just how many healers had entered the room to see Ginny's empathic abilities. There wasn't room to swing a kneazle.

"Come on Fred, wake up." George stood up and shook his brother.

"Sod off." Fred slapped feebly at his twin's hands.

With a shriek Mrs. Weasley pushed past everyone, grabbed her son and hugged him to her sobbing. "OH, Fred."

"Mom, get off. Get a grip." Fred said weakly.

No longer paying attention to the twins, Harry was concerned about how quiet Ginny had fallen. He tried to pull her away to see her face but she crumpled and he scooped her up into his arms. At once the healers tried to take her from him but Harry glared at them and said. "She needs to be with her family. Just put another bed in here."

A bed fit for a princess appeared without another word. The healers squeezed out of its way. None of them wanted to leave. Mr. Weasley pulled back the satin white covers and Harry gently lay Ginny down on silk sheets. Her father drew up the blankets and tucked his daughter in, kissing her cheek. He turned back to Harry his eyes were shining with tears. "Quite a girl we have here." Mr. Weasley said hoarsely.

"One of a kind that's for sure." Harry agreed absentmindedly, really wanting to push past Mr. Weasley and take Ginny in his arms again. Then he saw Mr. Weasley's hands shaking as he smoothed the covers on Ginny's bed. Glancing at the man's face, Harry saw Mr. Weasley looked almost as pale as Fred. His eyes reflected relief but they were still tinged with fear. Harry put a hand on his shoulder. "They'll both be fine, Mr. Weasley." Harry glanced at Fred, who was now being examined by the mediwizards then back at the half a dozen healers checking Ginny. "I think, Ginny still had some sort of connection with Fred. She had to help him to help herself."

With Harry's touch Mr. Weasley seemed to shake even more. His wife appeared as if summoned and slid her arms around Mr. Weasley's waist. Instantly Harry noticed Mrs. Weasley's touch seem to be as comforting to her husband as Ginny's touch was to him. This simple act of support touched Harry more than he could really understand.

Mrs. Weasley turned to Harry. "Thank you Harry. For bringing Ginny." She smiled weakly at him.

“Like I can say no to her?” Harry snorted. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley laugh. There was even a chuckle from Fred. “Oh,” Harry thought of something. “Uh, I better send an owl to Madam Pomfrey. She’ll be having kittens when she finds Ginny gone.”

“Not to mention your friends will be wondering where you are, Harry.” Professor Dumbledore entered the already crowded room smiling reproachfully at him. Several healers departed to make room for the great wizard.

Smiling sheepishly at Dumbledore Harry said. “I figured my friends would understand.” He gave a hopeful look at the headmaster and saw him sigh heavily.

“I do understand Harry.” Dumbledore said gazing at Fred, who still was weak but gripped George’s hand as if he would never let go. The old wizard turned to observe his sister. “How are you Ginny?”

“Tired.” Ginny’s weak voice answered from behind the many healers around her bed.

“Rest then, you have certainly earned it.” Dumbledore said gently then more sternly he turned to Harry. “We must return to Hogwarts, Harry.” He nodded to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and left the room.

Following the headmaster Harry had an uneasy feeling. He hadn’t liked the look Dumbledore sent him. Even though his unauthorized trip to St. Mungo’s had turned out fine, Harry could tell Dumbledore wasn’t pleased by it. Walking silently behind the old wizard Harry was led down a corridor with fireplaces like at the Ministry of Magic.

“We will return to my office.” Dumbledore said shortly then he took a pinch of floo powder from a pot on a mantle and threw it into the fire. The flame flared green as Dumbledore stepped into the fireplace. “Hogwarts Headmaster’s office.” With a whoosh he spun out of sight. With a sigh Harry followed.

“Sit down Harry.” Dumbledore was already behind his desk when Harry appeared from the fireplace in the circular room. With his eyes on the old wizard’s face he sat down on the chair in front of the desk.

"Is anything wrong Professor?" Harry asked. He was beginning to feel even more uncomfortable by the penetrating stare the headmaster was giving him.

"There is Harry." Dumbledore said very slowly. "You see Harry, I am the headmaster of this school and with that I am responsible for the students within these walls." Harry blinked, not really understanding where this would lead. "I must maintain certain acceptable guidelines that apply to all students." The emphasis on all made Harry shift in his seat. "Leaving the school grounds without permission is not within those acceptable rules Harry." His face felt hot as Dumbledore continued. "Therefore I must..." It was Dumbledore's turn to fidget in his seat. He cleared his throat. "I must impose a detention on you Harry."

"What?" Harry felt like he had been kicked. "But Ginny had to go to Fred."

"You had time to obtain permission and I certainly would not have stopped you." Dumbledore pointed out. His vivid blue eyes were gazing at Harry almost apologetically. "I'm sorry Harry but tomorrow night you will clean the cauldrons in the dungeons. With all the healing potions Professor Snape has had to brew he is quite behind mopping up."

"Clean cauldrons?" Harry snorted. "Is that all?"

"What did you think I would do? Have you whipped?" Dumbledore frowned.

"No, not really." Harry shook his head then gave the headmaster a rueful grin. "You're right. I should have asked. Sorry."

A smile smoothed the wrinkled old face. "I thought you would be angry with me." Dumbledore said.

"Over a bit of cleaning?" Harry said laughing. "I hope our friendship has become stronger than that."

"It is Harry. And it is getting stronger as we speak." Dumbledore smiled then looked at Harry seriously. "Do remember I am Headmaster and must act as thus even in friendship."

"I'll try." Harry said almost laughing again at the guilt Dumbledore still showed.

"Thank you." Dumbledore said sighing. "I do find it hard to inflict any sort of punishment on you." He swallowed. "I had thought of sending you to Professor McGonagall but recognized the action as a bit cowardly."

"I do tend to over step my boundaries don't I?" Harry smirked. "Snape's words coming back to haunt us both."

"Perhaps." Dumbledore said with a tone and inflection so much like the potions master Harry had to laugh again. "But I do like the man you are becoming despite your disregard for rules." Dumbledore said fondly. "Now off to bed." He waved his hand toward the door.

"Goodnight Professor." Harry said as he left the headmaster's office. It didn't take Harry long to tell Ron and Hermione what had transpired at St. Mungo's. Although he did have trouble pulling Hermione off his neck as she sobbed for joy over the recovery of Ginny and Fred. Ron had stood there not able to speak and wasn't much help.

Just as he got comfortable in his four poster bed, a familiar force pressed his mind as Harry began to drift into sleep. A dull throb in his scar was like the rap of a knocker on a door.

"What do you want now?" Harry said with a tone that belied his interest.

"You think you have won." Voldemort raged. "You have not, Harry Potter. I will get what I want in the end."

"And what do you want Tom?" Harry used his given name just to infuriate him. "Do you really know?" He gasped as his scar seared. The questions seemed to anger the Dark Lord more than the use of his name.

"I want the girl and the traitor." Voldemort spat. "I will have them both before this is through Potter."

"That statement alone seals your doom." Harry said struggling to contain his own anger.

"Why? Do you love her?" Voldemort smirked. "Does she love you?"

"Don't speak of something you know nothing about." Harry warned feeling a power he could only contribute to his love for Ginny rise in him.

"I know more than you ever dream of learning in your short pitiful life." Voldemort gloated.

"Perhaps." Harry drawled feeling a sense of calmness he seldom felt when his scar burned so. "But what have you done with that knowledge. Murder? Destruction? You have learned so much but know so little." Sadness flowed back to Voldemort.

"You pity me?" The Dark Lord laughed mockingly. "Save it for your girlfriend."

"No sadder thing is a wizard so old and wise who can not see his own end." Harry mocked in turn. "The next time we meet, we will see who knows what is important. Good night." The responding anger from Voldemort made Harry gasp as the pain shot through his scar. But a grim smile stayed on his face as he fell asleep.

Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Author's notes: Reviews! Thanks so much!

Wow what a month. I really didn't go into hiding. Things just happen you know. Taxes, lawn mowing, I had to reload windows on my 'puter and then my horse banged up his leg so he took extra time. He's just fine now. I think he does this every spring so I don't get in the mood to start riding him.

Then horrors of horrors...I LOST MY NOTEBOOK! I write a lot of stuff when I'm out for lunch and I must have left it somewhere...by gawd I don't know where! And I just imagine someone trying to read my chicken scratches wondering what insane person was writing all this stuff. (sigh) Oh well life goes on.

I was trying to pack the year end into this one chapter. But since the losing of the NOTEBOOK...I'm going have to rewrite some stuff. In actuality this chapter stands by itself just fine so maybe it was a sign. (sigh) My poor notebook. :o(

One more chapter! For those who were wondering, with a few things that happened in these last two chapters, a plot bunny has begun breeding in my brain for a seventh year story, after the 'real' book comes out of course. No promises but we'll see what happens.

Chapter 59 3/4

Stifling a yawn, Harry munched on his bacon, automatically looking up as the post owls flew in for the Monday morning delivery.

“Still no Hedwig.” Harry said.

“Good. Maybe the muggles don’t want your protection.” Ron said.

“Yes, I really hope you don’t have to go back to those people.” Hermione said a bit angrily in Harry’s behalf.

Although there was no sign of Hedwig, Max, the Weasley’s new family owl, fluttered down between Harry and Ron. Three letters were tied to his leg. Scowling at the owl Ron untied them, while Harry gave the bird a piece of bacon.

“How’s this. My family’s owl brings you two letters and me one.” Ron complained as he handed Harry two envelopes.

Glancing at the writing, Harry saw at once, one was from Ginny. The other had large loopy writing on the address that he didn’t recognize. A large gray owl landed in front of Harry and the official looking envelope it held made his stomach clench. It was from the Ministry of Magic. Thinking he would get the bad news over first Harry tore open the ministry letter.

“Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received a report of you transforming from your animagus form to human outside the boundaries of Hogwarts School. As you are still an underage wizard this is in violation of the statute of underage magic.

As you have received previous notices on such activities you will be fined one hundred galleons. If you would like to appeal this fine contact the Department of Magical Law Enforcement official Amelia Bone and a hearing will be arranged.

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office.

Harry let out the breath he had been holding. It could have been much worse. Seeing Hermione eyeing him Harry handed her the letter. "I'll have to transfer some gold from my Gringot's account."

"You mean you're not going to fight this?" Hermione's eyes flashed. "You were perfectly right in doing what you did."

"I think that's why they only gave me a fine Hermione." Harry began opening the letter with the loopy writing. Ginny's letter he would save until he was alone. "I am on probation. I don't want to rock that boat."

"I forgot." Hermione said, looking a little worried then in almost a whisper. "They could have put you back in prison. I guess it's best if you don't argue with them."

"That's what I thought." Harry sighed. He focused his attention on the letter now and put the envelope on the table.

"That's Fred's hand writing." Ron said picking up the envelope. "How's he doing? Or doesn't he want his brother to know." From the tone of Ron's voice Harry could tell his friend was annoyed Fred hadn't sent the letter to him.

"Fine from what he says. Mainly he's just thanking me for bringing Ginny to him before it was too late." Harry paused as he read on a bit. "But here George added that Fred couldn't fight his way out of a wet paper bag." Harry snorted. Even in Fred's letter the twins couldn't help commenting on each other's words. "Ginny's still very weak too." Harry sobered with this line then laughed aloud at the next. "Listen to this. 'Of course she doesn't have a chance of getting stronger since they won't let her lift a finger for herself. It's really tough sharing the room with her Royal Highness the Empath and being a mere serf unworthy to wipe her Royal,'" (Here something had been crossed out and the word 'boots' written above a word Harry could see started with an A). "'But on the other hand it does make for instant room service.'"

"It doesn't sound like she'll be back for the end of the year feast." Hermione said.

"No it doesn't." Harry sighed, looking up to see Hermione's concerned look. "I don't care as long as she'll be alright." He said firmly.

"Since it looks like you'll be coming to stay at headquarters with us, you'll see her as soon as she gets out of St. Mungo's anyway or when we get there if she's already been released." Ron said.

"Excellent point." Harry said brightly trying to shake off the sense of loss he felt with Ginny being gone. It didn't work and he sighed. "I'll still miss her."

"Just think of the wonderful greeting you'll get when you finally see her again." Hermione grinned. "Anticipation makes kisses even sweeter." She pounded Ron's back on the back as he choked on a bite of toast.

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After Transfiguration Professor McGonagall reminded Harry of his animagus test.

"I've been thinking about that too." Harry said. "Professor Dumbledore wants me to attend the End of Year feast so I want to be done with my animagus part the day before the feast."

"That means you would begin on Thursday and end on Friday." McGonagall studied a schedule as she spoke. "I will inform your other professors you will be attending classes as a phoenix that day."

"Thanks again for all your help Professor." Harry said. "Ron wants to become an animagus too." he looked at her hopefully. "I don't know if his parents have given him permission yet but..."

"Molly and Arthur realize their son is nearly of age and denial of his request would be rather pointless." McGonagall interrupted.

"Excellent." Harry grinned. "I was wondering..."

Again McGonagall cut across him. "You were wondering if I would help Mr. Weasley. I have already assured his parents I would assist their son in becoming an animagus."

Great! Thanks Professor." Harry then felt confused. "Does Ron know?"

"Of course Potter." McGonagall briskness returned. "He was informed while you were gallivanting off to St. Mungo's." A twitch at her lips told Harry her words were sterner than her thoughts.

"Oh." Harry looked properly abashed. "I have detention tonight." He said hastily.

McGonagall eyed him sternly as if considering the punishment might not be severe enough then all of sudden her expression softened and she said softly. "Well done Mr. Potter. Well done indeed." Then just as abruptly she shooed him out of her room.

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"Why didn't you tell me your parents gave you permission to become an animagus?" Harry asked Ron as they walked across the bright entrance hall to the open doors of the castle. Since they didn't have Defense Against the Dark Arts Harry, Ron and Hermione were going outside to see the runespoor.

"It slipped my mind." Ron shrugged. "With everything..."

"I suppose a lot of things have gotten pushed aside." Harry sighed. A strange pang went through him as he gazed out across the grounds at the scorched scars in the normally green and lush lawn. That would take a long time to heal too Harry thought. Automatically he glanced in the direction of Hagrid's cabin, thinking if they had time they would visit the game keeper too. Harry stopped in his tracks then his mouth hung open.

"Harry?" Ron and Hermione asked together then followed his gaze and gasped.

“What happened?” Harry asked as he took off running, Ron and Hermione on his heels. The cabin near the Forbidden Forest was a pile of rubble.

“I don’t know.” Hermione said worriedly, panting as she struggled to keep up with Harry and Ron’s longer strides. “We haven’t been outside since...”

The shoulders of a large man came in view over the rubble and Harry sighed with relief. But as Hagrid straightened from talking to two men beside him Harry found the shock almost as great as the destruction of the cabin. “What happened to him?” He asked stopping dead in his tracks again.

“Didn’t you see?” Hermione panted. “He’s alright Harry. Don’t worry. He just got well, as he says ‘singed a bit’ trying to protect the students by using his body as a shield.” Hermione said in breathless awe. “It was amazing Harry. He kept a lot of students safe.”

“Hermione doused the flames but as you can see.” Ron repressed a smirk with a look from his girlfriend. “Madam Pomfrey said his hair would all grow back. But she said a hair replenishing potion would have undesirable side affects.” A snort escaped Ron’s control. “She said it would make hair grow all over his body, inside and out.”

Still not able to take his eyes off Hagrid’s bald pate slowly Harry began to walk toward the ruin cabin. With no hair on his head or face Hagrid’s head looked too small for his body. But as he drew closer Harry could see some giant features in Hagrid that he hadn’t noticed covered in the thick tangle of hair.

“Hagrid!” Harry called. “What happened? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Don’t get in a stew.” Hagrid said gruffly. “A giant, or two by the looks of it, stepped on me cabin as they took to the forest.”

“Oh Hagrid.” Hermione looked as if she was about to cry. “Your house.”

"It's only a house Hermione. " Hagrid laid a large hand gently on her shoulder. "No need for tears. These two chaps are gonna build me a bit bigger one. I've got a room up at the castle until it's done."

"That's great Hagrid." Harry said automatically still not able to take his eyes off the hairless face of his friend.

"I look that odd do I?" Hagrid chuckled, giving Harry a cuff on the arm that sent him nearly to the ground. "Oops sorry."

After righting himself, Harry had to laugh too. "Yeah, you do look strange. How long will your hair take to grow back?" Now that he was closer to Hagrid, Harry saw a thick growth of stubble on his head and face.

"Shouldn't take mor than the summer. I always was a fast hair grower." Hagrid rubbed his chin. "I'd ask you in for a cuppa but..."

"We were going over to talk to the runespoor anyway. Once your house is finished, we'll come see you." Harry said.

"Should be done later today." The taller wizard said impatiently. "If we get a move on."

"Right." Hagrid said. "See you three later then."

"Not tonight I've got detention." Harry said. "But tomorrow for sure." Harry, Ron and Hermione gave a wave to Hagrid and walked toward the lake.

Even before they were with in speaking distance Harry saw the bright orange coils of the runespoor on the sandy shore. For some reason and Harry couldn't have told anyone why or how he knew, but the moment he saw the runespoor's body he knew she was upset.

"Hapa? Kesho? Giza?" Harry called loudly as he approached a little ahead of Ron and Hermione. The three heads rose but instead of turning toward him all three pointedly looked in the opposite direction. He moved around so he could see their eyes. "How are you doing?" Harry said brightly holding up a hand to stop Ron and Hermione from

getting closer. Again they looked away from him. Harry started to speak and a whispered 'faithless' escaped one of them.

Then a venomous hiss issued from the three heads. Quicker than Harry thought she could move, the runespoor slid into the water, swimming for the other side of the lake.

"What's wrong?" Ron asked watching the undulating body of the serpent swim.

"I think she's mad at me. Hang on." Harry put a hand on Ron's shoulder to pull off his shoes then threw his robes to the ground. Getting a running start Harry jumped into the lake after the runespoor. It was lucky for him she was of such great length for he just managed to catch a hold of her tail before the water would have been over his head

A loud gasp came from the beach as all three heads whipped back at Harry spitting and snapping. The runespoor thrash about, churning the water into to a frothy. Not loosening his grip, Harry hauled the slowly tail back toward shore. Although the hissing and snapping continued, Harry didn't think any of the heads would go so far as bite him even if they were angry.

"Leave us." Hapa hissed. "Leave us to the other, faithless worm."

"First you're going to explain why you are angry with me." Harry panted as he pulled the serpent on to dry land.

"Thou are not our master." Kesho spat.

"What? You want me to take the shield back from Snape?" Harry sat down holding on to the runespoor stripped tail even as she was pulling him toward the water. "I will if I have to."

"Hisssshh, thou barter us like fodder for cattle." Giza rose to snap at Harry, impeding Hapa's progress back to the lake.

"I didn't trade you." Harry argued. "Snape needed your protection more than I did. I thought you liked him and wouldn't mind."

“Ssssss. The battle has been over two days hence. Where hast thou been?” Hapa hissed furiously.

“My friend was hurt. I couldn’t leave her.” Harry said solemnly. “I thought we were friends, beyond that stupid shield.” He let go of the runespoor tail. “Sorry to have bothered you.”

All three heads turned to stare at Harry. They turned and looked at one and other then went back to staring at Harry again. “You do not wish for the shield?” Hapa asked sounding very puzzled.

“Well, the shield is a cool piece of magic.” Harry said. “But like I told Voldemort, I rather have you as a friend than the shield.”

“Only once in a long line of masters, too numerous to count, have any wished for our friendship.” Kesho hissed softly then looked to the heads to her left and right. “He has the power.”

“What power.” Harry asked before the others could respond. Again without knowing how he knew, Harry saw the runespoor was growing increasingly fearful.

“To release us.” Kesho breathed so softly Harry wasn’t sure he heard it.

“To release her from the bond to the shield.” Hermione in a quiet gasp of realization.

With Hapa and Giza staying unusually quiet Harry expected it was true. Why? Again he had no idea. “Do you want to be released?” Harry asked thoughtfully.

“To become what?” Hapa found her voice. “I would not call humans more intelligent than runespoors but to slither among the beast in the wild. I think not.”

“Nor can we be a pet.” Giza hissed. “To lay at thy feet as a dog.”

"To know only one life for so many long years, how can one give it up?" Kesho hissed a sigh.

"Good because we do need you on our side." Harry said wringing out his t-shirt. "But I have been thinking about this summer and where you would be staying." He said tentatively. "Now don't go off again. Let me explain." Three sets of eyes blazed at him.

"It's this way. Most likely I'll be back at the place we were over the Christmas holiday. And as roomy as it is, you wouldn't be allowed outside. Too many muggles about." Harry told the runespoor. "And if by some chance I go back to the Dursleys....well as much as I would love to see their faces when you came slithering out of a crate, you couldn't go outside there either."

"We would bear it. We have been confined before." Hapa said resolutely.

"I know. For fifteen years you were in that egg where my mum put you." Harry nodded. "I haven't asked Snape yet because I was waiting to talk to you first. If you want, you could stay here. He could look after you this summer. You would be much more comfortable here by the lake." Again the runespoor seemed stunned into speechless and stared for a long moment at Harry. "I thought it was a good idea." He added feeling uncomfortable by the silence.

"You thought of our comfort before your ownership of the shield?" Hapa asked as if trying to comprehend such a thought.

"Well, yeah. At least here you can catch frogs and feel the sun. At headquarters all you would have would be rats." Harry said. "And my room at the Dursleys is small. We would be very cramped. I doubt if Aunt Petunia would allow you in the rest of the house."

The orange coils looped now wound around Harry's body. Giza laid her head on his left shoulder and Hapa placed her head on his right shoulder. Kesho stared into his eyes as and flicked his nose with her tongue as she spoke. "You are a friend indeed Harry Potter."

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"Come in." Snape answered Harry's knock the dungeon classroom door. The potion master looked up from a pile of scrolls and jerked his head towards the back of the room. "Get to work, Potter." Then he scowled as Harry pulled out his wand. "No magic Potter."

"Professor Dumbledore didn't say..." Harry began but Snape cut in.

"I say so." He sneered.

Giving Snape a resentful glare Harry walked to the back of the room and pushed up his sleeves, starting with the largest cauldron. "Oh, I wanted to tell you..."

"This is detention, not a social visit Potter." Snape growled. "Get on with it."

"Sorry Professor." Harry said innocently compliant. "I'll wait until later then to tell you how to work the time controller." He quickly stuck his head into the cauldron but was just able to see the sour look on Snape's face.

"What did you say?" Snape sprang up from his desk.

"These cauldrons sure are dirty." Harry's voice echoed as he hid a smirk inside the vat. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end as he heard Snape approach.

"Do not play game with me Potter." Snape's voice was deadly serious and Harry felt the fun of the jest go cold.

Pulling his head out of the cauldron, Harry straightened up. "It's okay to tell you now?" Harry flinched at the look Snape gave him. "Right." Quickly Harry told Snape of his talk with Ginny and the words 'Time to go' mentioned by both Fredrick Potter and Cleo.

"Ingenious." Snape drawled. "I must hand it to Miss Weasley." He nodded appreciatively. "Her powers of perception are equal to her empathic abilities."

"She also suggested you take this with you, to show my mum." Harry put his hand in his robe pocket and pulled out the bracelet. He held it out for Snape to take. "It was in my mum's stuff and it's so unusual....What?" Harry broke off as Snape had taken a step back away from the bracelet.

"That is not an object you should be giving to someone without thought Potter." Snape still eyed the piece of jewelry cautiously.

"Why? There's nothing wrong with it." Harry pulled back his hand and stared at the bracelet. "Is there?"

"I am not an expert on enchanted jewelry but I do know a Branching bracelet when I see one." Snape said. Before Harry could ask he repeated. "A Branching bracelet, Potter. It grows or so I've heard as the love for the one it has been given to grows."

"It won't hurt Ginny will it? Harry looked up worriedly.

"It is not a piece of dark magic, Potter. Your girlfriend is fine." Harry scowled at Snape for the scathing tone he used. "In fact..." Snape's tone softened. "Was she wearing this when she tried to save her brother from the killing curse?"

"Yes, well, I think so." Harry thought for a moment then remembered. "Yes, she had it on when we were eating pizza."

"It could have made the difference." Snape said thoughtfully obviously thinking hard.

"Difference of what?" Harry still worried the bracelet had done something to Ginny.

"Of life and death Potter." Snape replied silkily.

"I don't understand." Harry wished Snape would stop speaking so cryptically. "Does this increase the wearer's power?"

"No, not that I am aware. More so, it would enhance." Snape shook his head as if not agreeing with his choice of words. "No, perhaps

focus would be a more accurate description.” Again the potion master gave a slight shake of his head. “As I said, I am not an expert on enchanted jewelry. Professor Flitwick could give you more details on the charms used to create a Branching Bracelet.”

“But why don’t you want to touch it?” Harry asked then regretted it when a smirk crossed Snape’s face.

“It is a Potter family Branching Bracelet. When a Potter,” Snape did his best to control the dislike in his voice. “Gives this to a person they like, or love, a new branch springs forth from the larger gem.” He indicated the large emerald. “As you can see, Miss Weasley’s branch is yet small but...” Snape pointed, but didn’t touch, to a tiny green stone barely visible. “Her affection for you has already created a new stone.”

For a moment Harry studied the bracelet. “So these other branches and stones are from other Potter...”

“Loves.” Snape said snidely.

“That still doesn’t explain why you don’t want to touch it.” Harry focused his eyes on Snape’s face.

“My touch would wither every branch to dust Potter.” Snape couldn’t help the amusement or a slight smile that played at his lips. “Although I can control my outward reactions to the name of Potter, my true feelings I could not conceal from the bracelet.”

“Oh,” Harry couldn’t see any reason to be angry with Snape for an admission of dislike to his family. Harry felt the same about Snape. “Since it’s changed my mum wouldn’t believe it was hers. Would she?” He sighed looking at the piece of jewelry again.

“Not necessarily.” Snape said slowly then asked. “Tell me Potter, which stone was the one your mother created?”

“I don’t know.” Harry said, glancing at Snape in irritation then back at the bracelet. After gazing at it Harry found he did know. “This one.”

Harry pointed to an emerald in the midst of the others. "I don't know how I know but I do."

"Perhaps your mother will know too." Snape said. He turned to a cabinet next to him and rummaged in it for a moment. "Here wrap the bracelet in this cloth. As long as I don't touch it with my skin it should be fine." Harry took the black silk cloth and carefully folded it around the bracelet then handed it to Snape.

"Ginny did have another suggestion." Harry said thoughtfully. "On how to convince my mum you are on the level."

"This I do have to hear." Snape leaned against table and folded his arms across his chest. After Harry told him about Ginny's suggestion of taking a worn t-shirt for his mother to smell Snape dropped his arms and stared disbelievingly at him. "You can not be serious."

"I consider my source of information." Harry shrugged. "Ginny and Mrs. Weasley. If anyone knows about a relationship between mother and son it's those two."

"Alright Potter." Snape sounded defeated. "I would rather take your shirt and not need it than be hexed by your mother." Quickly getting his temper back Snape straightened. "Very well, that is settled. Now get back to work." Snape's heels clicked sharply on the stone floor as he strode back to his desk without another word to Harry. Long used to the man's strange turns of moods Harry returned to scrubbing cauldrons.

It was two in the morning before Harry climbed exhausted into his four poster and drew the hangings around to shut out the light from his wand. "Lumos." Harry propped his wand up so he could read Ginny's letter. His pruned fingers fumbled as he unfolded a very small piece of parchment.

"Dear Harry,

I miss you so much. Despite what other say, I'm doing much better. I will be at the Leaving Feast.

All my heart and love,

Ginny”

He turned the note over and found nothing on the backside. The disappointment Harry felt was immense. What he had really expected Harry didn't know but much more than 'I miss you so much'. Rereading the letter, Harry noticed the handwriting was labored and not like Ginny's normal writing. He studied her signature and decided it was definitely hers. Maybe Ginny was too tired to write more. Harry sighed and felt guilty for expecting more from her. Reading the note a dozen more times Harry sighed again and put it under his pillow. He picked up his wand and whispered. "Nox." After placing his wand on his night stand Harry was asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Author's notes: Thank you for your reviews and your patience.

I know it's been too long but sometimes life just gets in the way of really important things like this story. There is actually more to this chapter but I haven't gotten it from my 'new notebook' to the computer yet. I didn't want you to think I had just dropped the ball here. So I thought I'd post what I had so I wouldn't get stoned. The story is pretty much completed on paper so don't worry about it not being finished.

(Plus my computer Yesterday...again decides windows needs to be reinstalled. arrgh. I know this sounds like a cheap excuse but unless you every had to re-install everything...it's a nightmare. Especially since I just got it back to where I wanted it.) I wanted to do more editing on this but I don't have word installed yet and it 's late I better just send this off.

A couple people have asked me if I made this story up as I went. Yes and no. I had specific events or 'mini stories' already created or in my mind. Then to get to those smaller stories I made up things on the fly. I hope that made sense. The tone of the story changed from my original thoughts. I think what kept me going on this story was I had and ending already thought out. I just had to get to it.

Someone asked if I would do sort of a recap at the end of the story giving my thoughts of what went along. I could do this but I think everyone interprets and puts their own perspective on what they read. Maybe I will after it is all finished and I'm waiting for the next 'real' book to come out.

Chapter 61

The days leading up to the end of term swirled with mixed emotions throughout the castle. Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs felt exhilarated by their successful defense of Hogwarts. But the death of Dennis Creevey clouded their victory making the war no longer faceless.

The Slytherins seemed even more separated from the school than before. Three classmates were missing from the Slytherin table but the other school houses were not sympathetic in the least. If possible the other houses were even more openly hostile toward the Slytherins. Then rumor began that Slytherin house would be disbanded and the students in it now, expelled.

On Thursday morning after breakfast, Harry turned into his animagus form. Professor McGonagall set a timer around his scarlet neck so he would know when to change back to human. "When the bell goes off, switch back immediately." She told him.

Harry warbled a laugh, finding this very amusing for some reason. Professor McGonagall looked down her nose at him standing on a bench at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall. "Keep your head about you Potter. It may be easy for the first few hours but keep focused." She warned as if she knew he was thinking the test would be effortless. Trying to give the impression of seriousness Harry bowed his head to her but inside he was grinning. "I have warned you." She stared fixedly at him and added. "Good luck."

Cheerfully Harry winged his way through the front doors following Ron and Hermione to Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. Harry kept well out of sight of the runespoor near the lake.

In a very short time Harry became frustrated not being able to talk to Ron and Hermione. A couple times an inadvertent question asked of him nearly made him transform back to human. After the second time he caught himself from changing, Harry gave up trying to listen to the conversation. Instead he focused on his phoenix form, taking the time to learn more fully the abilities available to him.

Already aware of his phoenix eyes' long distance acuity, Harry spent two full hours practicing focusing his sight in an instant. Only stopping when he could, without effort, find the person he was thinking of in a group so far below him it looked like another scorch mark on the lawn.

Concentrating on a particular noise was a lot harder, especially when Harry flew high. The wind distorted the sounds he heard even if he hovered quietly on a thermal. Before he could master his hearing Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix, joined him in the air high above the castle as the shadows lengthened below them.

Once again the phoenix made it plain he wanted Harry to follow him. With hardly giving the castle a backwards glance Harry winged on beside Fawkes as they set out toward the mountains. The crisp air was clean and sweet between the two mountain peaks Harry and Fawkes flew between. Harry filled his lungs savoring the smell and taste of the breeze. It was like breathing life itself. Like one could exist just from the air alone here.

A beautiful sound drifted to his ears as they rounded the other side of the tallest mountain. Phoenix song! Not just one phoenix singing to encourage the downhearted but at least fifty all singing the same song of joy, of welcome. From clefts in the side of the rock wall phoenixes took flight to join Harry and Fawkes in the air. Scarlet blurs swirled about him, occasionally brushing against him in their exuberance. In human form Harry might have found the rush of wings confusing and alarming but as a phoenix he knew they meant no harm and only felt happiness over the unconditional acceptance of him.

Fawkes landed on the very top of the mountain, hanging on to the outcropping with his golden talons. Harry gripped the rock beside Fawkes surprised how normal it felt to be perched thousands of feet in the air on top of a mountain. The flock of phoenixes found rocks below them and settled down, arranged as if in a meeting. Harry laughed, sending pure tones tumbling down the side of the mountain. This was truly the order of the phoenix Harry thought as his laughter joined the songs from the other phoenixes.

Then Fawkes seemed to address the group below him. Not in words like the runespoor used but with his dark eyes staring. All the phoenixes watched Fawkes closely. Harry studied the scarlet bird intently too. Even though he began to understand what Fawkes was communicating to the other birds, Harry found it very hard to put into human words. The more Harry listened the more he understood whatever knowledge the phoenixes allowed him to be privy to, had to remain a secret. Unsure of how to do it Harry attempted to give the other scarlet birds his promise of silence.

The moment Harry gave a response; the phoenixes took flight again. Fawkes called to Harry. In the midst of scarlet wings Harry felt talons grip his tail. In a flash of flame he disappeared from the mountainside. Erupting a moment later over a beautiful green meadow at the edge of a thick wood. The sun shone brightly above them. They must be hundreds of miles away from Hogwarts, the sun was setting there. Dread clutched Harry. Away from Hogwarts without permission, he would be in great trouble now. But on the other hand, Harry thought as he followed Fawkes insistent call, he, Harry, hadn't done magic outside of school. Fawkes had brought him here and hopefully would take him back when he asked. So maybe nobody would know he had been gone at all.

With this thought Harry cheered up and followed Fawkes to a huge holly tree in the middle of the wood. This wooded area wasn't like the Forbidden Forest dark and creepy but rather light and full of hope. Fawkes and Harry landed on a broad branch close to the trunk in the holly tree. The posture of Fawkes immediately changed. He kept bowing his head as he walked carefully along the limb out where it disappeared in a tangle of other branches. Copying his movements Harry went after him.

Through a small gap in the branches Fawkes slipped through and Harry squeezed in after. It was a tight fit. Inside Harry blinked at the glowing golden light shimmering all around them. Then he felt as if his heart would burst with a joy. There in the middle of a nest made of twigs and what looked like rainbow sheep wool a scarlet phoenix sat. Her scarlet neck swayed and she made a warning noise similar to a hiss. Then the phoenix shifted so her wing draped protectively over a single golden egg covered it completely.

Fawkes did return Harry to the Hogwarts grounds. But the phoenix couldn't seem to tell him or Harry couldn't understand, the significance of the golden egg. The story the runespoor had told kept returning to Harry's mind. But There was no way he could ask the serpent about things to do with phoenixes. Dare he question Dumbledore? All night Harry pondered this question as he sat on the west tower gazing down on the grounds, although very dark he could see quite plainly with his phoenix eyes. He went back and forth whether to ask and if it violated his promise to the phoenixes. Slowly Harry considered if he did ask Dumbledore he could say the runespoor's story made him curious and it was the first chance he had to inquire about a gold phoenix egg.

At breakfast Harry, Ron and Hermione sat in the Great Hall waiting for the timer to go off. At half past the hour Harry heard the bell around his neck and he transformed back to his human self.

"Are you alright Harry?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"I'm fine." Harry flexed his arms. He had done a lot of flying and his muscles felt stiff.

"So how was it?" Ron asked bluntly. "Spending all day as a phoenix?"

"Not bad." Harry hedged. He couldn't tell them all that he was bursting to. "The hardest part was not talking to you two."

"Where were you all night?" Ron asked quietly, his eyes darting to Hermione.

"On the West Tower. I thought I'd better stay awake. I tend to change back when I fall asleep." Harry explained also giving Hermione a quick glance. He really didn't want to be lectured by her.

To both their surprise Hermione remained silent. Nor did she give Harry even the least of reproofing looks. "That stage of your test is finished. Do you think you can hold out a whole week not changing into your animagus form?" Hermione asked.

"I won't be able to. I'm still an underage wizard once I leave Hogwarts." Harry frowned slightly. She of all people knew this.

A smile flickered then Hermione pressed her lips tightly together so she would laugh then said slowly. "Well, I have heard..." Her eyes seemed to dance with amusement. "They might change the law. Considering how well we underage wizards helped defend Hogwarts."

His mouth dropped open. Would he be able to stay in his human form? Harry heart raced. Did he have that control if he had the choice? He glanced at the staff table and saw Professor McGonagall striding toward their seats.

"Well done Potter." She said as she approached. "I will warn you only once. You must not change to your animagus form for seven days." McGonagall held out her hand for the timer. Harry gave it to her. She tapped it with her wand and gave it back to him. "There, once it goes off you have officially past your animagus test."

"Are they really going to change the underage wizard law Professor?" Harry asked quickly.

She gazed at him with a quick flick of her eyes to Hermione. "It has been proposed at the ministry, considering You-Know-Who's return. But until they do, you are still bound by the underage magic law, Potter."

"Right, Professor." Harry gave Hermione a glare for scaring him unnecessarily. She just grinned back. "Thanks again for your help. I expect I'll see you sometime over the summer."

"I expect so." McGonagall nodded a slight smile flickering at her lips. "Have a good holiday all of you. You better be off to class."

All day Harry found he was restless and constantly thinking he forgot something he should be doing. Only when he, Ron and Hermione were out sitting with the Runespoor later that day did he figure out what was the problem. A bird flew low over the lake and the desire to

follow it swelled up so great in Harry he stood and spread his arm as if to take flight.

“Harry what are you doing?” Hermione grabbed his arm to stop him.

“Uh,” Harry stared after the bird skimming the water surface. Then he felt another hand on his other arm.

“Hey,” Ron tapped side of Harry’s head. “Get a grip.”

“What?” Harry started and looked confused as to why they were holding on to him. Slowly it dawned on him. “Oh, I almost blew it didn’t I.”

“In less than a day.” Ron smirked. “What are you going to do for a week?”

“By then he’ll have control of these urges. It’s just a day after his phoenix day.” Hermione said trying hard not to smile too much.

“Thanks.” Harry grinned sheepishly at them. “Once I’m at Headquarters I probably won’t have any of these urges because we never go outside. And I won’t see a bird flying to tempt me.”

“True, depressing but true.” Ron sighed. “You’d think they’d be able to create some sort of garden we could go out to.”

“Maybe they just haven’t thought of it,” Hermione said, sitting back down, “because it really wasn’t meant to be a place for whole families to live in secret.” Her face was sober and sad.

“Well I’ll say something to them. We can’t spend a whole summer cooped up inside.” Ron said hotly as he plopped next to Hermione.

Not saying anything, Harry sat down beside the runespoor and stroked the orange coils. He kept his eyes away from the lake and any motion that looked like a bird on the wing. No doubt about it, it was going to be a long week.

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After breakfast the morning of the leaving feast, Harry and Ron went back to their dorm to pack. Harry seriously considered putting an enlargement charm on his trunk as he tried to arrange all his spell books and robes so everything would fit. He didn't remember having this much trouble packing at the start of term.

A rustle at the window made Harry look up. A snowy owl brought the sent of summer into the room with the sweeping of her wide wings. "Hedwig!" Harry cried.

"It looks like she has an answer." Ron watched as she landed on Harry's trunk.

Taking a deep breath Harry took the letter from owl's beak. "Thanks Hedwig." He stroked her then unfolded the letter. Silently he read it.

"Well?" Ron said impatiently frozen with his hand on his trunk lid.

"They signed the agreement." Harry said quietly, feeling a bit numb. He thought he had escaped them at last.

"Damn." Ron slammed the lid to his trunk shut. "Why'd they wait until the last minute to let you know?"

"I dunno." Harry shrugged and threw the letter into his trunk on top of his tightly packed robes, now thoroughly depressed

"You'll be okay though." Ron failed at trying to sound cheerful. "And it won't be for long."

"No." Harry stroked Hedwig again, finding the softness of her feathers soothing.

"Hey, why don't I stay with you?" Ron offered.

A hopeful look crossed Harry's face then vanished. "Naw, I'm used to the Dursleys. You shouldn't have to put up with their...dung. Thanks anyway."

"They don't scare me." Ron said firmly. "Besides the more you can irritate them the more they'll want you out of their house for good."

"Yeah," Harry could see the merit in Ron's idea. It would be nice to have someone to talk to but... Harry caught Ron's eyes. "You would really do that for me?" The question seemed to surprise Ron.

"Well, yeah. You are my best mate." Ron shrugged as if the answer was obvious.

"If you want to." Harry felt himself smiling again. "How about a week after I get there?"

"Or sooner, if I hear from you." Ron grinned back.

"Thanks Ron." Harry held out his hand to his friend. The redhead grasped it and slapped Harry's shoulder.

"No problem." Ron said brightly.

"I better go see Dumbledore and tell him where I'm staying for the summer." Harry said, the dread of going back to the Dursleys seeped back even with Ron's offer. Still, it could be fun to watch the Dursleys squirm trying to keep their comments to themselves.

"I have a prefect meeting in..." Ron looked at his watch. "Damn, I'm late. Hermione will have my hide. See you later then." He dashed down the spiral stairs.

After telling Dumbledore the Dursleys had signed the agreement. Harry left his office with a vague feeling he had wanted to talk to the headmaster about something else but couldn't remember what. He shrugged off the feeling and headed down to tell Snape and ask if he would see to the runespoor over the summer. With the potion master's agreement Harry wandered outside to see Hagrid. He hadn't talked to Hagrid much and wanted to say goodbye.

"Come in." Hagrid boomed when Harry knocked on the cabin door. Hagrid's new house looked very much like the old one, except it was

larger and had two rooms. Hagrid's huge bed now occupied a room of its own.

"Hi Hagrid." Harry was a little surprised when Fang had to jump a little to lick his ears.

"Harry, good to see you. How about some dandelion juice?" Hagrid offered.

"Thanks." Harry patted Fang and smiled at the new huge chair in the corner. Fang's basket was next to it.

"Sit down." Hagrid set a glass on the table in front of him. The large man sat down and let out a breath. "Been quite a year."

For some reason Harry had to laugh. "I think that is the understatement of the year Hagrid." The stubble covered face broke into a grin but scowled when Harry told him he would return to the Dursleys.

"Lousy muggles." Hagrid growled. "Maybe I ought to send Fang with ya."

"I can just see Fang drooling all over Aunt Petunia's floors." Harry laughed and Hagrid chuckled too. They both took several sips of their drinks.

A long moment passed before either spoke then quietly Hagrid said. "One more year." He caught Harry's gaze and the beetle black eyes sparkled with tears.

"Yeah. Harry fingered his glass. "One more year."

"You won't forget to come back and see me when you're all growed up? Will ya?" Hagrid said gruffly.

Harry's eyes opened wider in surprise. That was the very last thing he would have guessed was on Hagrid's mind. "No I won't forget to visit you." Harry said firmly.

"It happens you know." Hagrid shrugged. "People lives go on and," He waved his large hand toward the castle. "Hogwarts is just a part of the past."

“The Dursleys will be the past I’ll forget Hagrid.” Harry’s eyes blazed.
“Not you or Hogwarts.”

“Any other student I wouldn’t put much stock in them words. But I know you, Harry, you’ll keep your promise” Hagrid said seriously and raised his drink to him.

“Cheers Hagrid.” Harry raised his own glass and sighed. “One more year.”

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The Great Hall was decorated with the four house banners of scarlet with a golden lion for Gryffindor, a black badger on field of yellow for Hufflepuff, blue with a bronze eagle for Ravenclaw and a silver snake on green for Slytherin. And behind the teachers' long table the school banner with the four houses united around the letter H.

“This is like when the Tri-Wizard opened.” Ron nodded to the swaying decorations.

“Yeah.” Harry sighed. He would rather be with Ginny at St. Mungo’s. But Dumbledore had personally asked him to be at the Leaving Feast. He had said it was a show of strength for the younger students. Harry had balked at the thought. Then Dumbledore firmly informed him as a student entering his final year at Hogwarts, Harry has a responsibility to the lower classes to set a good example.

After staring at the headmaster with his mouth open Dumbledore had given a little twist of his head and added. "Outside of all your extra curricular activities." The old wizard's eyes twinkled.

“Alright. If you think it is important.” Harry conceded with a slight smile. He was finding it harder to argue with Dumbledore these days.

When all four house tables were seated Dumbledore stood up. All eyes were upon him.

“There is much I could say tonight about many things.” Dumbledore started. “First, a remembrance to a young Gryffindor, Dennis Creevey.” He paused and nodded toward the Gryffindor table at Colin Creevey, whose face was very pale.

“I think such a courageous energetic spirit will never truly die as long as he is remembered by those who knew and loved him.” Harry could see tears standing in Dumbledore’s blue eyes as they all rose and raised their goblets to Dennis Creevey.

When they had all sat down, for a long time Dumbledore stood gazing at the students, slowly turning from one house table to the next as if looking at each person individually. An air of anticipation grew as he panned the tables. Finally he nodded to himself as if coming to a decision.

“There is an individual I must speak on tonight. For never in all my years of Headmaster and before as a teacher have I been so proud of a single individual.”

A flush rose on Harry’s face. He felt his temper rage. Dumbledore had promised him. Promised he would not say anything about him nor even mention Harry.

Again Dumbledore gazed down each table. “No one has more courage or shrewd power.” He glanced down the Slytherin table then at Gryffindor. “And never have I seen such dedication in a brilliantly executed plan.” The headmaster focused on the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs in turn. Harry stared at his golden plate, his face burning. Why did Dumbledore have to break his word?

“I am of course speaking of Hogwarts.” Dumbledore revealed.

The knot in his stomach seemed to spring loose and Harry snapped his head up to look at the Headmaster. A confused muttering died away as Dumbledore spoke again.

"Hogwarts is one house tonight. Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw are merely rooms in this castle." The headmaster seemed to swell with pride. "The way all of you stood shoulder to shoulder against Voldemort and his followers was extraordinary. More than I could have asked of any student in this school." Dumbledore picked up his goblet. "In his attempt to crush us, Voldemort has united us all." He turned to his left and right nodding to the teachers. The staff rose as one.

"We honor each and every student tonight for their bravery and cunning, for the outstanding skill and hard work in extraordinary service to this school." All of the professors raised their drinks to the students in front of them and said in unison. "Hogwarts" then drank, bowed to their students and sat down.

They were all so stunned the house tables were utterly silent. "No one wins the house cup this year. But Hogwarts is defiantly in first place." Dumbledore said earnestly then soberly he continued. "Unfortunately, although we have won a battle the war still will rage on. However, I truly believe when people of different ideals can stand as one against an oppressive force our victory is inevitable." Dumbledore bowed to his students and sat down. The Great Hall erupted in a deafening cheer.

Automatically clapping with the rest of the Gryffindor table Harry wasn't listening to Hermione's interpretation of Dumbledore's speech. His gaze was focused on the Slytherin table. They had stopped clapping first and seemed as uncomfortable as the Durmstrang Triwizard candidates had at the end of that year.

A blond head caught Harry's eye. It was the same seventh year Slytherin who had tried to help the first years when the dementors had attacked. For a moment Harry stared at him. He still didn't know his name.

"Where are you going?" Ron asked helping himself to steak as Harry stood up.

"I'll be back in a sec." Harry said. He walked to the end of the Gryffindor table turned left then proceeded pass the Hufflepuffs and

Ravenclaws to the Slytherin side of the hall. Heads turned as he walked the length of the Slytherin table and a low muttering broke out as students paused from eating to watch. Stopping a third of the way down the Slytherin table Harry didn't have to tap the seventh year on the shoulder to get his attention; all eyes in the hall were upon them.

"What?" The blond teen asked defensively, having watched Harry's progress to him.

"I didn't get a chance to talk to you after the attack." Harry said quietly. "I just wanted to say good job protecting those first years." Harry put out his hand. "By the way I'm Harry Potter."

"We know who you are Potter." Spat Pansy Parkinson.

"And you are?" Harry ignored the Slytherin girl, who was obviously in a horrible temper now her boyfriend, Draco, was locked away.

"Giles Jugson." Medley still looked on the defense but he shook Harry's hand. "I didn't do much. It was you..."

"You held the dementors off until help could arrive." Harry injected. "That's a lot. Anyway I just wanted to find out your name. Good job." Harry clapped his hand on the teen's shoulder turned and walked back down the Slytherin table then across the hall. He could still feel eyes upon him as he found his seat across from Ron and Hermione, who both sat staring at him in disbelief. The general hubbub of the students broke out again.

"Credit where credit is due." Harry shrugged as he reached for a plate of pork chops. The feeling of being watched intensified making him glance at the staff table. Dumbledore caught his eyes and raised his goblet. Harry picked up his goblet of pumpkin juice and held it up. Even from here Harry could see the twinkle in those bright blue eyes as he and Dumbledore drank their silent toast together.

Though the talk was more subdued at the Gryffindor table than normal due to the death of Dennis Creevey, the seventh years were still managing to have a good time at their last feast. Idly Harry wondered how it feels not to come back to Hogwarts. Next year

would be his turn to leave. But he would be back to visit, Harry vowed glancing at the staff table to where Hagrid sat talking to Professor Sprout.

His melancholy mood was intensified by the absence of Ginny. Ron and Hermione sat close, feeding each other and laughing which didn't help much. Not until Harry cleared his throat did Ron and Hermione seem to notice they were in the Great Hall, surrounded by people.

They both looked guilty for excluding Harry. "Sorry. Harry." Ron said wiping some mash potatoes off the corner of Hermione's lip. "You were saying something about...?"

"I said I missed Ginny." Harry sighed. "I thought sure they would let her come to the feast."

"She just needs to get more of her strength back Harry." Hermione assured him. "You'll be seeing her by..." Before Hermione could finish the doors to the Great Hall burst opened with a bang.

All heads turned and a whoop of laughter rang through the silence. Not even realizing he had made the noise, Harry sprang to his feet and sprinted toward the doors. Walking slowly toward the Gryffindor table was Ginny Weasley. Still in a St. Mungo's dressing gown and supported on both sides by Fred and George, she grinned as shouts of welcome chimed out. Sliding to a stop in front of her Harry gazed down at her, his heart threatening to burst. Then without warning, Harry swept her off her feet into his arms, kissing her soundly.

Ignoring stern looks from Fred and George, Harry carried Ginny to the Gryffindor table. He paused to conjure a cushion for her then set Ginny gently on the bench. Cheers rose from the Gryffindor table then Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw joined as Ginny laughed with tears flowing down her face.

Silence suddenly fell as the students notice Dumbledore rise to his feet. Fred and George stood protectively behind Ginny and looked innocently up at the headmaster.

“Welcome back Miss Weasley.” Dumbledore gave her a nod, his eyes twinkling like brilliant stars. “And as for you two.” He gave then a glare that did not cover his amusement. “How you managed to get past St. Mungo’s security with their most revered patient is extraordinary not to mention arriving here in due time. I expect though there will be retribution but none as severe as your mother’s.” The grins on the twins’ face fell. “However since you did miss last years feast, I welcome you to join us.” Dumbledore sat down his eyes dancing at the twins’ discomfort. Then Fred and George sank onto the bench on the other side of Ginny.

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For the first time since Remus Lupin was the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, adults rode the Hogwarts Express. An auror stood on guard at all doors on and off the train. Several aurors were patrolling the corridor from the scarlet engine to the caboose at the very end. This pretty much eliminated the need for the prefects to make rounds.

The mediwizards from St. Mungo's were to say the least fuming at Ginny's trip to Hogwarts. However a return trip by train, they conceded would be no more tiring than any other means of transportation. So Ginny sat beside Harry covered with a light blanket and several potions by her side the healers had sent for her to drink on the way home. She was quieter than Harry liked but he was too glad to have her with him to care. Ron and Harry played wizard chess as the train rattled on. Eventually Hermione picked up on Harry's thoughtful pauses and sighs.

“It should be better this summer, with the Dursleys? Shouldn’t it?” Hermione said encouragingly.

“It should.” Harry gave her a weak smile. “Still they aren’t going to be happy about it.”

“They don’t have to be happy.” Hermione said grimly. “They just need to keep their big mouths shut and leave you alone.”

"That's one of the problems." Ginny cut in. "Harry is all alone when he's with those..." Her eyes smoldered as she tried to find a suitable description for the Dursleys. But finally in disgust spat out. "People."

"Actually," Harry put a hand to his forehead and tried to mimic Professor Trelawney's mystical voice. "I had a premonition that I'll have a visitor come and stay with me a week into my confinement." He grinned slyly at Ron.

Hermione turned to Ron. Ginny stared at him across from her. "You're going to stay with Harry?" His sister asked a little fearfully.

"Yeah. It won't be for long." Ron shrugged then blushed beet red as Hermione's arms went around his neck and she kissed him.

"You are the best friend anyone could ever have." She squeezed him.

"I'll have to agree with you there Hermione." Harry said, enjoying Ron's embarrassment.

"Then why do you seem so sad?" Hermione asked Harry after she had let go of Ron. Harry shrugged. Ginny slipped her arm through his and leaned against him.

"You are among friends you know." Ginny prodded.

"I do know that." Harry sighed. "It's just." He felt his cheeks flush as he caught her eyes. "I'm going to miss you." Ginny pulled his arm around her and laid her head on his shoulder, blinking hard. Harry saw Ron open his mouth, most likely to tell them they were sitting much too close but he closed it when he saw the tears in his sister's eyes.

The long shadows of a setting sun striped the station at Kings Cross when Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione passed through the barrier of platform nine and three quarters. Mrs. Weasley spotted them first.

"Over here." She called, waving her arm. Standing next to her was Mr. Weasley with Mr. and Mrs. Granger by his side. On Mrs. Weasley's other side was Tonks, Lupin and Moody. While Mrs. Weasley hugged

Ron and fussed over Ginny, Harry gazed around, looking for the Dursleys.

"Oh Harry." Mrs. Weasley grabbed him for a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Then she nervously glanced around. "Where's that snake?"

"She's at Hogwarts." Harry said still noticing the absence of his aunt and uncle.

"Hey Harry." Remus grabbed his shoulder and grinned. "You won't find your relatives here."

"Why? Tell me they don't want me to stay with them." Harry said hopefully.

"They still want your protection." Remus said apologetically. A scowled crossed Mrs. Weasley's normally kind face. "But I'm going to take you there to make sure they conform to the conditions."

"Excellent." Harry grinned. "How are we getting there?" There was a mischievous look to Lupin that reminded Harry of Fred and George. Remus beckoned Harry out to the street. A ministry car waited for the Weasleys and Grangers. Behind it sat a huge motorcycle. Harry laughed but stopped when he saw the distrustful look Mrs. Weasley gave the machine.

"Don't worry Molly." Remus must have seen her glare too. He lowered his voice. "I'm not going to fly it." Lupin opened a compartment at the back of the motorcycle and Harry helped him hoist the trunk into magically enhanced space. Then he handed Harry a helmet and strapped one on his own graying head.

"I still don't like those things." Mrs. Weasley flared then softened as she turned to Harry. "Now listen Harry, please be careful."

"Keep a low profile Harry." Mr. Weasley put a hand on his shoulder. "If you know what I mean."

Moody was more blunt. "You stay in the house as much as possible boy." Madeye warned him, the normal eye giving him a glare. Then a look of surprise distorted the mangled face of the old auror.

"I'm not hiding." Harry's eyes blazed. "And I won't be locked up again."

"Listen Harry." Tonks said in a low voice. "Without Snape informing on You-Know-Who's movements we have to take extra precautions." Harry remained silent. "It's harder now to know what he's planning."

"The Death Eaters and Voldemort have been too quiet after the attack on Hogwarts." Remus said then added in a firmer voice. "And we have to take extra precautions. Especially you Harry. I know you don't like being singled out but..."

"I understand what you are saying." Harry said carefully gazing at the people around him. "And I promise I will be careful." This seemed to satisfy Lupin because he swung a leg over the motorcycle and kicked up the stand. But an odd smile played across Harry's lips as he caught each person's eyes stopping on Moody's real one.

"You don't know what Voldemort is doing or planning." Harry said calmly. "But this much I can tell you." The tone of grim satisfaction in Harry's voice made the others look at him sharply. Lupin turned to stare at him. Harry drew himself up and squared his shoulders. With a lift of his chin Harry quietly stated. "Dumbledore is no longer the only wizard Voldemort is afraid of."

The stunned faces of Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, The Grangers, Tonks, Moody and Lupin reflected a look of power in Harry's eyes they had never seen before this moment. Giving Ginny a quick kiss on her cheek and a squeeze of her hand, Harry put on the helmet and swung his leg over the motorcycle behind Remus as the man still stared. Their eyes met. Harry raised his eyebrows, grinned and gave him a prod in the back. With a slightly confused look Remus slowly returned the smile then he turned. He kicked the motorcycle into life. It roared as Remus revved the engine. With a wave to Ron, Hermione and Ginny, Harry gripped Remus around the middle and the motorbike sped off in a puff of purple smoke.

The End

Author's notes: Thank you to all who stayed with me through this incredible journey of story writing.

Yes, there are a few things left dangling, just in case. But that is like life, not all things are known or understood. Golden Phoenix egg? What could that mean? That little tidbit just popped in from out of nowhere. No promises but things are smoldering around here. Maybe something will flare up eventually.

Again, thanks for all the wonderful reviews. Only a few short...or I should say a few very long weeks before we all have something to read!

Summer Holiday

A hot tarry smell rose from the road as Harry gripped Lupin around the middle. Cars seemed much too close as they sped past them on the motorway. Never having ridden a motorcycle before made the experience a little scary, which to Harry meant a lot of fun. Muggle children waved from cars they passed and he waved back grinning.

Harry glanced at the back of the man whose waist he clung to. The brown jacket looked new and well fitted. Remus had evidently found the heart to use some of the money Sirius had left him. A sigh escaped Harry. He was glad Remus could afford decent clothes but the price was too much for both of them.

Much too soon, the motorcycle slowed to go down Privet Drive then turned into the drive at number four. As Remus was putting down the stand of the motorcycle, now on the lawn in front of the house, a large beefy man came lumbering out of the house.

“Get that thing out of my grass!” Uncle Vernon shouted; his face purple with rage. “I will not have it.”

Unperturbed Remus dismounted the motorcycle, and took off his helmet. Lupin regarded Vernon Dursley solemnly. “If all is in order I will not be here long.” He laid the helmet on the motorcycle then turned to face the large man with a cold stare. “I’m here to ensure the conditions of the agreement are met.”

Uncle Vernon flushed darker purple and sputtered. “You needn’t have bothered. I’ve bought the boy everything on his blasted list.” His eyes had darted to Harry as he took off his helmet.

“Good, then as I said, I won’t be long.” Lupin still stared fixedly at Harry’s Uncle whose eyes now flicked around the street as if dreading a neighbor might see him this close to a motorcycle.

“All right.” Uncle Vernon growled. “Be quick about it.” He turned on his heel, and strode back to the house.

Harry and Remus removed the trunk and Hedwig's cage from the storage compartment of the motorcycle. Hedwig complained loudly as they carried the trunk and her cage to the house and up the stairs. A low rumble came from the living room. Harry knew it was Uncle Vernon trying to get a grip on his temper.

Remus pushed the door to Harry's room open and backed in with the trunk. But he didn't get far. The smallest bedroom was packed with a television, a small refrigerator, a video recorder, a computer and a telephone, all as it in the agreement. Harry grinned as he squeezed pass the trunk to look at the things. Then his face fell.

"What's wrong?" Remus asked examining the blank screen of the computer.

"All this stuff is at least fifteen years old. I wonder if it even works." Harry said angrily turning on the television. A low buzz filled the room. A white line scrolled across the screen then a squiggly black and white picture popped into view then flipped continuously. He turned from the television and hunted for the switch to the computer then pressed it. Slowly a the screen brightened with an amber C: appeared on the surface of the monitor. "This is useless." Harry said in disgust.

Frowning Remus opened the small refrigerator but closed it quickly when a horrible smell fell out. "I want to talk to your uncle." Lupin said not disguising the anger in his voice. The two went down the stairs to the living room. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were obviously expecting them. Harry noticed his aunt looked very scared.

"Before you say anything." Uncle Vernon pointed his finger at the pair of them. "I know something about contracts. I have followed the contract and expect you to do the same."

"But all that stuff is junk." Harry said angrily. "I can't use it."

"The contract did not say the items had to be useable." Uncle Vernon said smugly.

Harry's mouth hung open. If he knew anything about wizarding law, this little loophole his Uncle had found would hold up in court. "Fine." Harry said angrily. "I'll leave Voldemort to you. Let's get my stuff."

"Wait a moment." Uncle Vernon said. "I have provided the items in the contract so you have to stay. That...person who signed the post script said it was a mag..." Uncle Vernon stopped, not able to say the word magical. "He said it was a binding contract, so I assume it works both ways. If you break it, there will be payment of sorts?"

"Sure." Harry shrugged. "And when you're dead you can spend it." He turned to go back up stairs to get his trunk.

"Very clever of you, Dursley." Lupin said in a voice so smooth and at the same time menacing. Harry stopped to look at Remus. "You are quite right. Harry will have to fill his part of the contract." He paused to take out his wand. "I however, have no such contract binding me. And I have no qualms about turning you into a toad." Aunt Petunia shrieked and Uncle Vernon leapt back.

"Don't." Harry stopped Remus's arm. "They aren't worth it." He didn't want Remus getting into trouble from the Improper Use of Magic Department on his account.

"You are right they aren't." Remus agreed nodding but didn't lower his wand. "A toad would be too easy for them. How about?" A wave of his wand turned Uncle Vernon's suit bright yellow with a wide purple and red striped tie. "Much better. Very respectable."

"Stop! Stop this minute." Uncle Vernon shouted backing away from Lupin as he came toward him. "You have no right!"

"Dursley." Lupin put his face up to the cowering large one of Harry's uncle. "Be glad I don't do what I really should do to you." His voice was cold and hard. "You have one more chance. Replace those items with new ones or I will turn your son into a pig."

"It will take some time." Uncle Vernon whimpered. "I can't manage it all at once."

"You have two hours." Remus said taking a step back and sinking on to the sofa. "I'll wait."

The Dursleys seemed frozen for a moment then bolted to the door. Harry saw Dudley follow his parents out; not wanting to be in the same house as a wizard with a wand. "I don't know Remus. This could be trouble." Harry sighed as he sat down beside him.

"I hope for them it will be." Lupin said. "I can't believe you've had to put up with them for almost sixteen years." Remus looked guiltily at Harry.

"I survived." Harry shrugged.

"You needed more than to just survive." Remus said angrily. Harry never before seen Lupin so upset. His next glance into Harry's face told him why.

"Don't." Harry stopped the apology he knew was about to come. "Guilt won't change anything." When Remus looked like he was still going to say something, Harry said softly. "Believe me I know. It hasn't brought Sirius back." Tears sprang to Remus's eyes and he looked away quickly.

For a long while neither spoke. A sigh escaped Remus and he put a hand on the back of Harry's neck, giving him a squeeze and a shake. "Alright." He finally said. "I won't feel guilty about it." He dropped his hand to Harry's shoulder. "However, I do want to know what you meant at Kings Cross." A slow smile spread across Harry's face. "And don't you dare tell me, you don't know what I'm talking about." Remus warned.

"I just know." Harry smiled only slightly as if even though he knew what he said was true it wasn't something to crow about. "Voldemort is afraid of me. I felt it the last time we talked." His green eyes sparkled with amusement at the look on his friend's face.

Several times Remus started to speak but couldn't seem to form a thought. Finally he shook his head and gave Harry a side long gaze. "You have been spending way too much time with Dumbledore. I can

tell that right now.” Remus said half seriously. “You sound like him. And your eyes have taken on that twinkle of superiority.”

“Superiority?” Harry frowned. “Hardly.” He sighed. “Voldemort has lost confidence by all his failed attempts this year.” He considered the words he spoke next. “He knows I am at the center of these obstructions. And it has shaken him to the very core of his evil heart.” Again Remus stared at Harry.

“I do hope I’m at hand when you bring him down.” Remus finally said gravely.

“That remains to be seen.” Harry cast his eyes down. “I still,” he shuddered a little. He still knew how much more powerful Voldemort was than he.

“What?” Remus encouraged.

“I still can’t see how to defeat him. And every moment he lives more people will die.” Harry sighed.

“Still it isn’t your fault Harry.” Remus said gently.

“That’s some comfort for the families.” Harry said bitterly looking up. Then he sighed again. “But there’s nothing I can do to stop it, yet.” Harry shook his head then said in a voice almost like a small boy’s. “I don’t know how.”

“The way to defeat an enemy,” Remus said slowly, “is to learn as much about him and his ways as you can.”

“I know more than I care to about Voldemort.” Harry said as if he had a bad taste in his mouth.

“Yes, but I warrant there’s even more you could learn about him.” Remus thought for a moment. “I’ll speak with Dumbledore. Surely there are some books or someone who would know of how he learned the dark arts.”

"Yeah, but I can't use the dark arts. Remember?" Harry stretched getting tired of the seemingly endless thoughts running in his mind. At least Lupin hadn't patted him on the head, and that he, Harry, would find a way."

"No, but knowledge is power." Remus said.

"Yeah." Harry stood up. "Why don't we clear out my room of all that junk?"

"You want to make it easier for them?" Remus frowned.

"No, but it will give me something to do." Harry shrugged as he headed for the stairs, Remus following. The trouble was, with Lupin using magic, all the electronics and refrigerator were out in the hall with the wave of his wand. "Wait, leave that." Harry took the old video recorder floating in mid air. "This might work better with my mum's video tapes."

"You know, this room isn't very big, especially after all the new things. I could give it a bit of help if you like." Remus grinned at Harry with arched eyebrows. Harry grinned back and nodded. He watched Remus intently as the wizard began to chant an incantation. Harry could enlarge a trunk but something the size of a room he had never attempted nor had he seen enlarged by magic. The tricky part was not changing the outside appearance. He wanted to ask questions but didn't want to mess up the spell.

Slowly the walls inched away from each other. "Tell me when." Remus said still concentrating, giving a rhythmic bounce with his wand.

"That should be good." Harry snorted. The room was now the size of his dormitory in Gryffindor Tower. "How do you keep it from showing on the outside?" He went to the window to look out.

"Yes, much more comfortable." Remus stuck his head out of the window to look at the house too. "Actually it is a form of a disillusionment charm. The house is bigger but looks the same."

“Cool.” Harry turned to look at his room. “Now, Ron will fit in here nicely.”

“Oh, you have plans?” Remus gazed at Harry amused.

“He said he would come and visit. And well, stay for a bit.” Harry grinned.

“You’ll need another bed.” Remus said. “Let me know and I’ll come by and conjure one for you.”

“Thanks.” Harry smiled at the thought of his best friend. Looking at Remus took his thoughts to his father and Sirius, Lupin’s best friends. Sadness crept through Harry as he remembered Remus had only been a few years older than him when he was choosing a head stone for his best friend. “I visited my parents’ graves. Dumbledore took me.” Harry said quietly.

A cloud passed across the man’s face, making him look much older than he was. Lupin nodded to show he had heard.

“I know it must have been hard. He said you picked out their stone.” Harry continued.

“Yeah.” Remus couldn’t look at Harry but stared fixedly at the door. He was breathing shallow and seemed tense.

“I want to move them into the family mausoleum.” Harry saw Remus close his eyes as if trying to shut out his voice. “Dumbledore said it would be okay if I put up a stone for Sirius where they are now.”

For a long time Remus didn’t speak. Finally he wiped his eyes and nodded. “Sirius would like that. I’m sorry you have to even think of grave stones.” His eyes met Harry’s and tears still stood in them.

“A person does what they have to do.” Harry laid an arm across the man’s shoulder. “I’m glad they had a friend like you to look after such things.”

“As you said, a person does what they have to do.” Remus said hoarsely. He went back to staring fixedly at the door. Harry felt the shoulder under his arm shudder. Not trying to shrug off his touch but in response to the subject they were talking about.

“You really don’t want to talk about it do you?” Harry said removing his arm but still leaving a hand on the man’s forearm. Remus shook his head slightly. “I know how that feels. That’s okay. Maybe someday?”

“Maybe.” Remus gave a curt nod then his body slumped as the tenseness left it. “I’m sorry, Harry. I...” He looked up at Harry with pain in his eyes.

“Don’t be.” Harry stopped the apology. “I should be. I kind of hit you out of the blue with that. Sorry.”

“Yeah.” Remus glanced at Harry and gave him a slight smile. He took a deep breath and let it out.

“Maybe a cup of tea or something cold would be good.” Harry said and tapped Lupin’s arm. “Come on. We’ll raid the fridge while they’re gone.”

Harry led the way back to the spotless kitchen. He rummaged in the refrigerator to find some cold sodas and the last two pieces of lemon pie. The last bits had been picked from their plates when the front door burst open. A puffing and grumbling noise made its way noisily up the stairs. Aunt Petunia appeared at the doorway to the kitchen. Anger flashed on her face when she saw Harry casually eating at her table as if he belonged there then was quickly replaced by fear. She bit her lip to keep from saying anything wrong.

“Wonderful pie, Petunia.” Remus commented brightly. Before Aunt Petunia could say anything Uncle Vernon and Dudley came thumping down the stairs and burst into the kitchen.

“What have you done to my house?” Uncle Vernon bellowed. “I will not have it!”

"I did that." Lupin said coolly. "Harry needed a bit more room."

Uncle Vernon's chest heaved as he fumed. A vein had started pulsing on his temple and for a moment Harry thought he might just have a heart attack from trying to keep his temper and comments under control. "Don't worry you can't tell from the outside." Harry said.

"Did you get all of the items on Harry's list?" Remus asked taking out his wand and flicking it at the dirty dishes on the table. The plates, forks and glasses sparkled.

"Stop!" Uncle Vernon shouted. "I did not agree on allowing that unnatural..." He stopped himself before he said something wrong. "That ma..." Again Uncle Vernon could not bring himself to say magic. "That...stuff in my house."

"True." Lupin said calmly. "Nor did I or anyone else agree not to do magic in your house." A shudder went through all of the Dursleys. Harry fought hard not to break out laughing. "You have the items on the list?" He repeated.

"Well," Uncle Vernon looked worried. "Everything except the refrigerator. The store will deliver it tomorrow." He said hastily.

"Is that acceptable to you, Harry?" Remus turned to him. "If not we can leave right now."

"I suppose." Harry sighed. "If it doesn't come tomorrow, I'll send Hedwig to let you know."

Remus stood up. "If you are sure?" Harry nodded. "I'll stop by tomorrow to make sure everything is in order." He told the Dursleys then asked Harry. "Do you want help getting settled?"

"That's okay. I'll be fine." Harry again had to keep from laughing. Although he wondered if his uncle would have the restraint once Lupin left. He rose to see Remus out. Out in the front garden Harry felt a pang as he watched Remus put on a helmet and mount the motorcycle.

“See you tomorrow then.” Remus clapped Harry on the shoulder and kicked the motorcycle to life. With a wave of his hand he was off. Harry sighed and went back inside the house.

Down the hall Uncle Vernon glared at him, his face purple with rage. Harry arched his eyebrows at him as if daring him to say a word. The staring contest continued until his uncle dropped his eyes even though he still shook visibly with anger. “Goodnight.” Harry said and climbed the stairs to his bedroom.

The room felt strange enlarged. The same but not the same, Harry thought as he set up the television and video recorder on his desk. His uncle had never let him help with the television downstairs so Harry really didn’t know much about what cable went where. But after reading the manual Harry realized he was missing a necessary cable to hook the video recorder to the television. For some reason Harry didn’t mind that much.

As he lay in bed gazing at his enlarged bedroom, all the boxes stacked neatly by his wardrobe, Harry realized he didn’t really want the television, computer and all these things. All the years he had longed to have the things Dudley had, and now that he had them he knew it wasn’t what he wanted or needed. He really wanted his friends. These things weren’t part of his world, muggle or magical, his aunt and uncle had made sure of that. Oddly Harry felt a sense of freedom, not be tied to anything from the muggle world. The world he would soon leave behind for good. Still, Harry thought, the video tapes his mum had made could only be seen on these muggle things. How would he could he view them after he left the Dursleys? Harry frowned and closed his eyes as he thought about the problem. Maybe Remus would have an idea. He yawned. Then Harry saw Hedwig soar silently across the room and out the window as he drifted off to asleep.

Authors Note:

I’m sorry a sequel hasn’t appeared. Life got in the way. This was the start of the next story so I thought I’d post it even if nothing comes after. I lost a lot of my notes and my story outline in a flood a year ago. I don’t know if I have the time or the heart to continue this story.

I do read each and every review that comes to me. Thank you so much for letting me know how much you have enjoyed reading this story.